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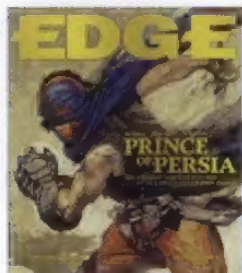


GRAND THEFT AUTO IV
 The verdict on 2008's
 most wanted title

THE WIRE
 One more than the dog
 cop... 40% of the way

ARTIFICIAL INTELLIGENCE
 The new wave of always
 stupid game characters





We're sometimes asked how we decide what to put on the cover of **Edge** (not least by the Men In Suits upstairs, but that's a discussion probably better suited to another time). The truth, ultimately, is that there are no rules that can't be broken, but sometimes we arrive at these choices having mulled over a great many considerations, while on other occasions we reach conclusions in shorter order. The decision to put PlayStation 3 on page one in November of last year falls into the former category (this was, if you recall, some months before every man and his dog started shouting about 2008 looking like it might actually be a better year for Sony's console business). And in the latter category you'll find things like issue 187's *Grand Theft Auto* treatment (when you're given the genuinely exclusive opportunity to tell the story of one of gaming's most valuable properties – a story you've wanted to tell for years – how could it not be a cover choice?). *Halo 3*, not only for reasons of legacy, was another obvious selection for a cover. *Super Mario Galaxy*, too, found its way on to the front of issue 180 almost as smoothly as one of the little plumber's arcing leaps into space.

We can add to the 'easy' category the new instalment in the *Prince Of Persia* series. This is, simply, a game with serious credentials. It's the work of creatives with experience stretching back to *The Sands Of Time*, one of the most charismatic and memorable gaming experiences of modern times. It's powered by Anvil, the tech that made *Assassin's Creed* one of the most visually arresting games of last year, yet it also succeeds in presenting a unique aesthetic, and does so in the context of an open world. We can't ignore the fact, either, that the game's appearance within these pages represents its worldwide debut. Perhaps most of all, though, it's the new instalment in the *Prince Of Persia* series. Our report from the game's Ubisoft Montreal development facility begins on page 54.

So, yes, that's how we decide what to put on the cover of **Edge**. Issue 190's is looking like it'll fit into category number one. It may be a controversial decision. No doubt you'll let us know what you think in due course.



CREATE

In *Assassin's Creed*, Ubisoft used Autodesk® 3ds Max® software to create a hero character so real you can almost feel the coarseness of his tunic.



ANIMATE

Autodesk® MotionBuilder™ software enabled the assassin to fluidly jump from rooftops to cobblestone streets with ease.



INTEGRATE

Using Autodesk® HumanIK® middleware, Ubisoft grounded the assassin in his 12th century boots and his run-time environment.



**HOW UBISOFT GAVE
AN ASSASSIN HIS SOUL.**

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UBISOFT

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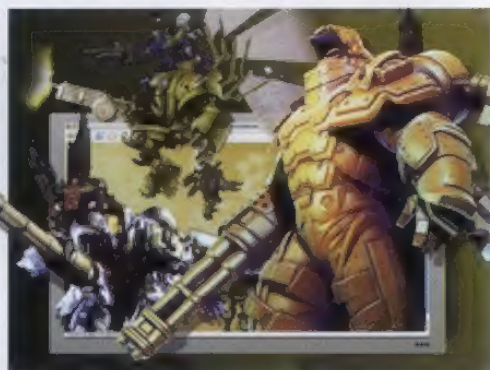
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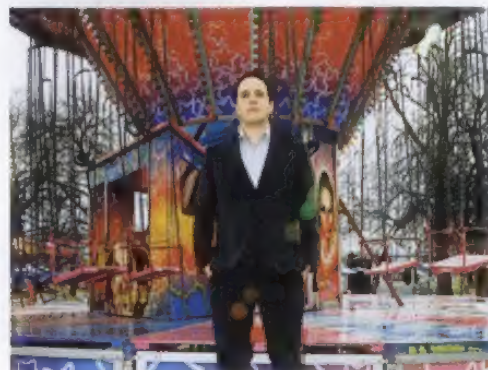
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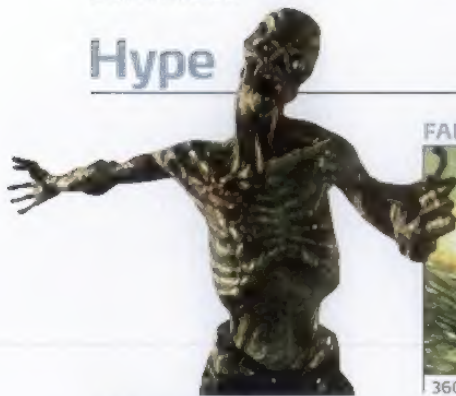
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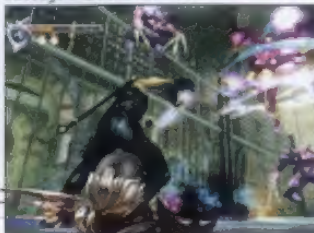
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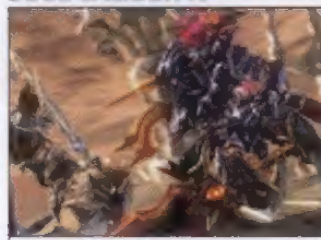
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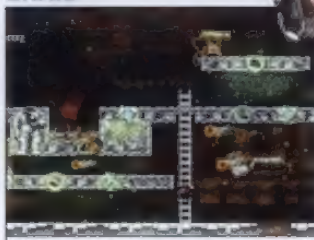
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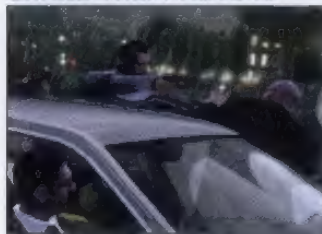
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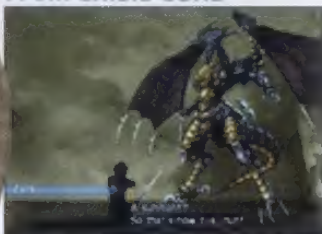
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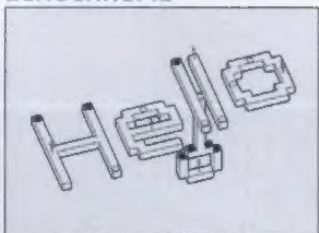


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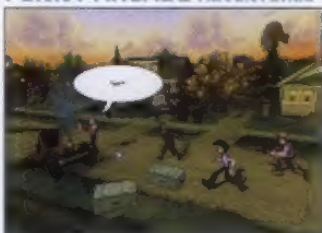
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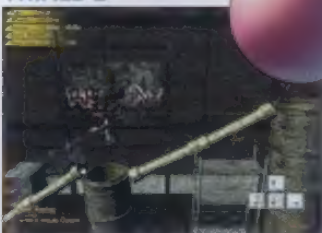
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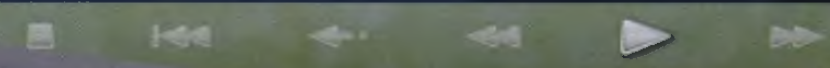
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Channel One

Football Round Up

Play



MULTIMEDIA

Game and watch

Why media companies are eyeing that powerful box connected to both your TV and the internet

On April 9, the BBC opened up its video on demand service, iPlayer, to Wii owners in the UK. To many, the move initially looked like a marketing exercise, or a case of hearty mutual backslapping. After all, it was soon apparent that all that had happened was that the iPlayer website and its content had been tweaked so that the Wii web browser could access it and stream low-quality Flash video, just like any PC.

But there's much more to this initiative. For this is the start of a concerted effort by the BBC, the world's largest broadcaster, to attempt to offer its content over the internet for access by not only Wii, but 360 and PS3 as well as many other devices. It's an ambitious plan that the BBC claims has made it the world leader in its field: "If you look at other video services out there, none of them has gone to the multiplatform extent that we have with iPlayer," says **Erik Huggers**, controller of the BBC's Future Media and Technology Group. "The BBC is leading the pack by pushing the internet-based video services onto platforms."

The choice of Wii as the first bearer of iPlayer on consoles, a month after it became available on iPhone and iPod Touch, appears to have been an easy one. Its 2.5 million installed base in the UK, the largest of the current console generation, is very much in line with the BBC's goal of reaching out to as many of its licence payers as possible. "It's more a cross-section of the British audience, I guess," Huggers says. "What we found is that our audience of linear television and radio is nicely matched to Wii's." Naturally, the deal was attractive to Nintendo, too. "The people that watch the BBC are just the sort of people that we're aiming for – families," says Nintendo spokesman **Robert Saunders**. "The BBC saw Wii as the videogame console that had moved out of the bedroom and into the family arena."

The main technical hurdle was to recode the video player for Flash 7, the version that's supported by Wii. It's clear that this implementation of iPlayer is something of a fudge, however. Flash 7 uses a relatively inefficient compression format; to achieve the same quality available on computers, for which video is encoded at 500kps, Wii requires 820kps. But Huggers regards this as an early beta and, according to Nintendo, the BBC only initially made an approach in early March. The intention is to iterate with improved versions on a monthly basis, and Huggers confirms he is already in talks with Opera and Adobe to get Wii updated to the latest version.



iPlayer on Wii has proven reliable, though having to zoom in on the video window rather than click a 'full-screen' button can prove fiddly. The large scale does expose the low quality, however



Huggers says that one of the biggest challenges ahead for services like iPlayer is viewer expectation. Once video is displayed on a large TV screen, viewers are less likely to accept the kind of quality they're used to experiencing via YouTube on their computers. The solution is ensuring there is sufficient bandwidth available



Erik Huggers has been the BBC's Future Media and Technology Group controller since May last year, having previously led business development for Windows Media and Microsoft's entertainment business. He's hotly tipped to shortly take Ashley Highfield's place heading up all the BBC's online activities

The ultimate aim, however, is to build a dedicated application for iPlayer, a desire that Nintendo shares, and a policy that the BBC would ideally extend to PS3 and 360. "It's early days on those," warns Huggers. "We know we can make quite a few improvements to the service, to the way it's navigated, and we're committed to that. Getting it out of the gate is priority number one. But we are certainly looking at ways of using console SDKs to make separate iPlayer applications for these devices."

Of course, the first question that many asked was why the service wasn't extended to PS3, given that it also supports Flash 7. Indeed, the day after the launch, an anonymous coder created a site, ps3iplayer.com, that gave it access to the Wii iPlayer by identifying PS3s as Wii's. The site displayed the note: "It only took a day to produce, so come on BBC - how about implementing this properly?" "I was flattered," laughs Huggers, explaining that the iPlayer team is still trying to track down its creator and offer him a job. "It's not the perfect situation, but this has encouraged us to reach out to Sony and arrange a more formal version on PS3 as soon as possible," he continues. "In the meantime it shows us that there's a great hunger and need for people to have iPlayer in the living room."

Indeed, the news of the move gained a lot more publicity and excitement than either Nintendo or the BBC expected, and Huggers has found that both Sony and Microsoft have since become a lot more receptive to his proposals. The central issue, however, is control. The BBC is quite protective over iPlayer's design: "We think that part of the success story of iPlayer is the user experience, the brand name, the navigation. We make it as simple as possible to use it. We want



to retain that as we start to port our services to a new set of devices." Nintendo was content for the BBC to have complete jurisdiction over its appearance and workings. "I think the iPlayer was slightly different in that at this stage it didn't need that much work, but we are broadly happy with what the BBC has done so far," says Saunders. But there are no guarantees that it will stay this way as the initiative develops. "As discussions carry on it's on a case by case basis according to the benefit for the end user," he continues.

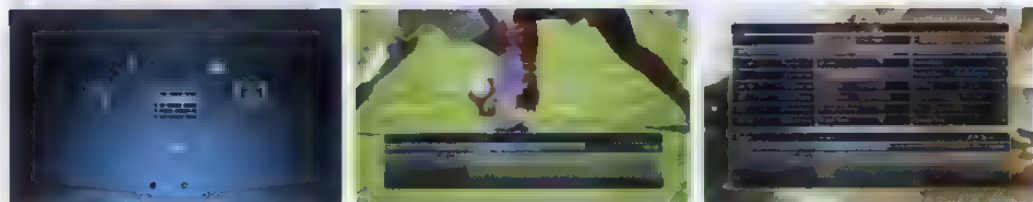
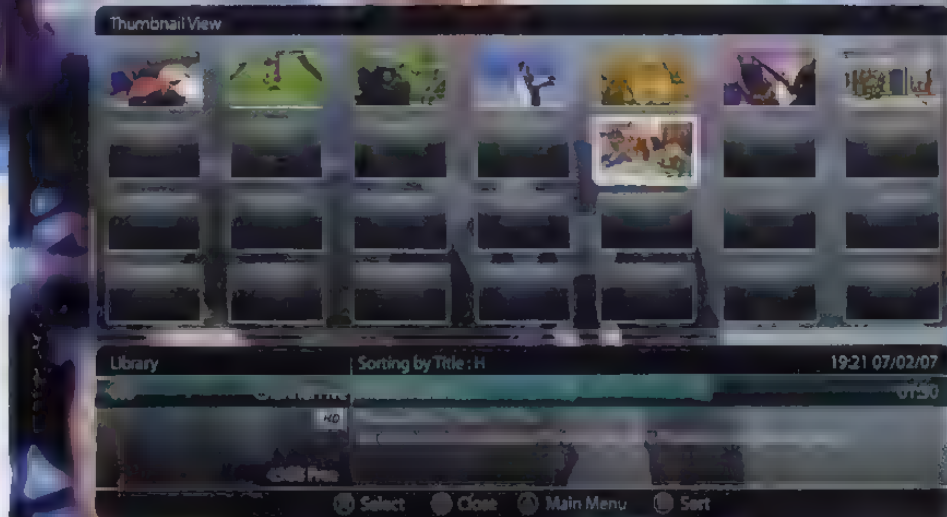
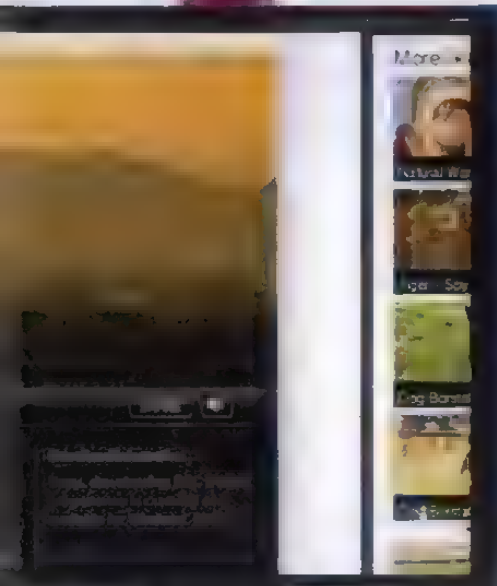
Bigger hurdles lie with Sony, and particularly Microsoft. Implementation on the browser-less 360 will require the iPlayer tech to have deep integration from the off. "If you talk to Microsoft, they have very strong ambitions to go direct to the consumer in a more, I call it, iTunes-like model," says Huggers. "Microsoft controls the look and feel, the business models, everything. The only role the BBC can play is to provide raw video and audio files." Sony, meanwhile, is proving more responsive, but the problem for the BBC is the corporation's sheer size. "Japan, US, UK - it's hard to navigate. In general I think we're now talking to the right people at the right level, and they're exceptionally positive," says Huggers.

Both PS3 and 360 also have their own video media initiatives to consider, too. On 360, there's the Video Marketplace: films and TV programmes for download at a price. But though the US store is stocked with a broad range of TV the day after airing, and around 350 films, the UK version is distinctly spare in comparison. UK owners will have



360's UK Video Marketplace has been active since late last year, but only recently has it accumulated a decent selection of films. It still falls short of what is available in the US

PlayTV



Sony's PlayTV is currently under development at SCEE Cambridge, and will consist of a box that plugs into a USB port on PS3. The interface sports beauty to match the rest of PS3's interface, but 40GB model owners may need to install a larger hard drive to take full advantage of its DVR capabilities. It contrasts with Sony's upcoming deal with Sky for PSP called Go! View, which will offer a range of video downloads from the media provider on a subscription basis or by pay-per-view.

access to BT Vision, however, the telecom company's on-demand video service, from mid-2008. Well, those Live members who subscribe to BT's broadband service will, while the system lacks both the Freeview digital TV and DVR capabilities of the BT Vision set-top box, which currently costs just £30. The barrier, according to BT, is the fact that not all 360s have a hard drive, and of those that do most are only 20Gb.

Sony, meanwhile, is pursuing a more open path. PlayTV is a Freeview digital TV tuner that when plugged into a USB port, turns PS3 into a

"iPlayer gives our customers another reason to use their Wii every day, and another reason for different people in the household to switch it on who might not want to play games"

DVR. Recorded programmes will, according to project producer Mark Bunting in February, be left as DRM-free video files so users can copy them off the console. Sony is also working on an on-demand film and TV downloads service over PlayStation Network, similar to Live's, potentially for release as soon as this summer in the US, according to rumours reported in the LA Times.

Gaming consoles are gaining many functions that are allowing them to tap into TV and on-demand video services, and media companies are well aware of their potential. "Every [media company] understands that gaming consoles connected to the TV set and the internet offer a

great opportunity," says Huggers. "It's just that they're going about it differently." But media providers don't yet see them as a direct threat. A source at Virgin Media informed us that the company isn't worried – its 3.5 million customers have access to a wider range of content than is currently available on consoles in the UK, and that's without the hassle of setting up internet connections and memberships. Instead, it's still torrents that are the big competitor – after all, many people savvy enough to be on Xbox Live are probably happy with Freeview and downloading everything else from torrent sites – perhaps streaming it to their TVs via their 360s.

But BT Vision and the BBC see consoles as a good way of extending their reach. Our aim is to provide BT Vision on multiple platforms – giving customers greater convenience, control and flexibility over what they watch, when they watch and how they watch TV. **Dan Marks**, CEO of BT Vision, said in a recent interview. "There's this concept at the BBC called platform neutrality," agrees Huggers. "We really want to make sure that as many people licence fee plays have access to BBC content in the interactive space."

The BBC's internet-based 'over the top' approach to providing its content through consoles and other devices contrasts strongly with cable companies' closed one, where they control all content that providers create. And it, here that big discussions in the media industry are taking

place – is it the cable model that will win consumers' hearts and minds, or the direct-to-consumer internet model?" asks Huggers. "Personally I think it'll be a bit of both, and I think the cable guys are in a good position right now because they've been doing this for decades, but I'm in support of the direct-to-consumer model. You can have a direct relationship with the broadcaster, and I think that if the UK internet industry continues to improve access speeds to match the rest of the world there is nothing stopping us delivering HD services direct to the living room via these consoles." The current average actual download speed in the UK is 3.2Mbps, according to top10-broadband.co.uk (compared to the US's 4.6Mbps and Japan's 10.6Mbps, according to speedtest.net).

But with corporate structures not used to dealing with media providers, hardware not designed around supplying it, and many powerful competitors in a complex business landscape, consoles hardly have an easy ride ahead of them. The console makers will need to be open to accommodate the needs of the likes of the BBC, and in so doing they will present a significant challenge to the domination of the cable companies. The rewards to console makers are many, but principally it inserts their products more firmly into their customers' lives and gives them broader appeal. As Saunders says: "iPlayer gives our customers another reason to use their Wii every day, and another reason for different people in the household to switch it on who might not want to play our games."



INTERVIEW

Rock band

We ask why Rock Band is twice the price for the eastern shore of the Atlantic, and don't get a satisfactory answer

Since design director **Rob Kay** (below), joined Harmonix four years ago, he's witnessed the *Rock Band* developer go from being obscure indie favourites to worldwide chart toppers. We talked to him to discuss the cost of success, the value of D.C. and the price of the European bundle.

In Europe, *Rock Band* is twice the price of the American version – what happened?

The price is worked out in collaboration between us, distributors and retailers. I'm from the UK, I understand the whole. Why is it that all consumer

"The price is worked out in collaboration between us, distributors and retailers. I don't mean to make excuses, but there's VAT, prices in the US don't include tax, and things like that"

electronics I buy have the same number, but with the dollar sign replaced with a pound sign? Thing, I feel the pain, the price is kind of frightening. I don't mean to make excuses, but there's VAT, prices in the US don't include tax, and things like that. We wanted to give people a choice, though, splash £50 on the game and use any USB microphone to sing. Or you could get drums or guitar.

What's delayed the European launch?

We wanted to get it right. We wanted to make sure there were enough UK tracks in the game, so we've added Oasis, Blur and Muse. The other thing we wanted to make sure was that we had all the hardware completely worked out. There were troubles with the reliability of the early guitars, which are now ironed out. Two years ago, we were just a software company. Now we've got this hardware arm, factories in China, learning how to ship around the world, a whole logistical challenge that we did a pretty awesome job of, considering it was the first time.

Are you any closer to reaching an agreement with Activision allowing PS3 *Guitar Hero* guitars to work on *Rock Band*?

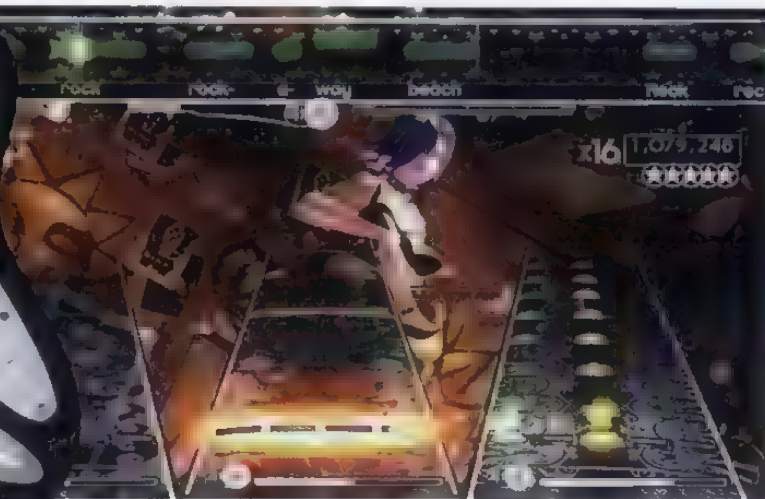
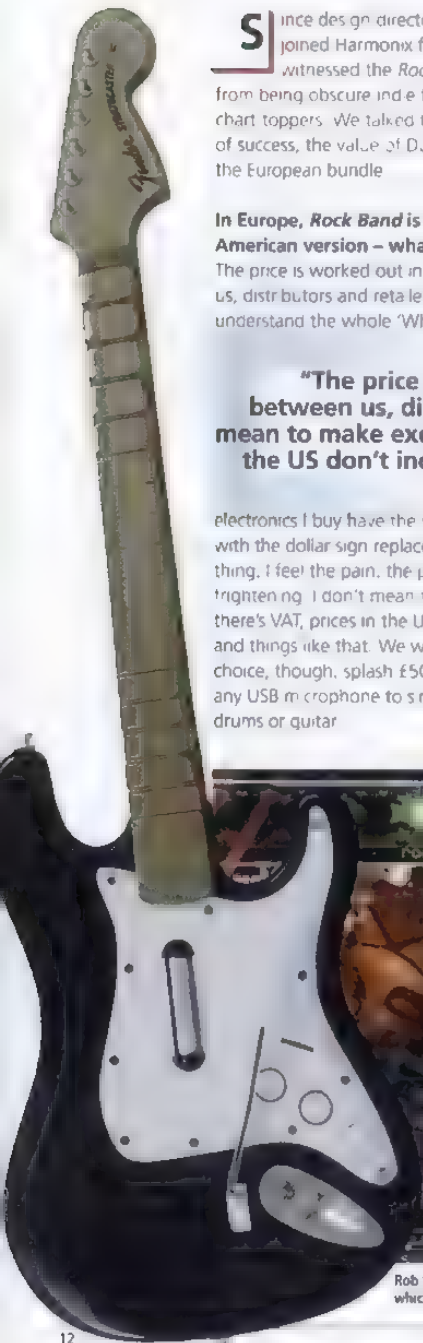
Our approach is that music games shouldn't be competing with each other. It should all be compatible, because people have a ready gone out and bought stuff. So if people want to make their stuff compatible with *Rock Band*, please let us know.

In cases where companies, for whatever reason, decide that their hardware shouldn't be compatible, we direct people to go talk to those companies.

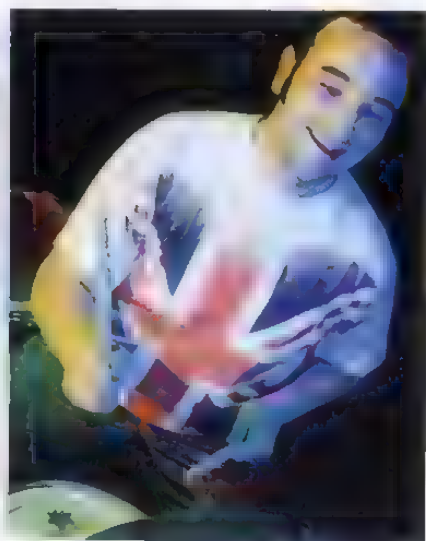


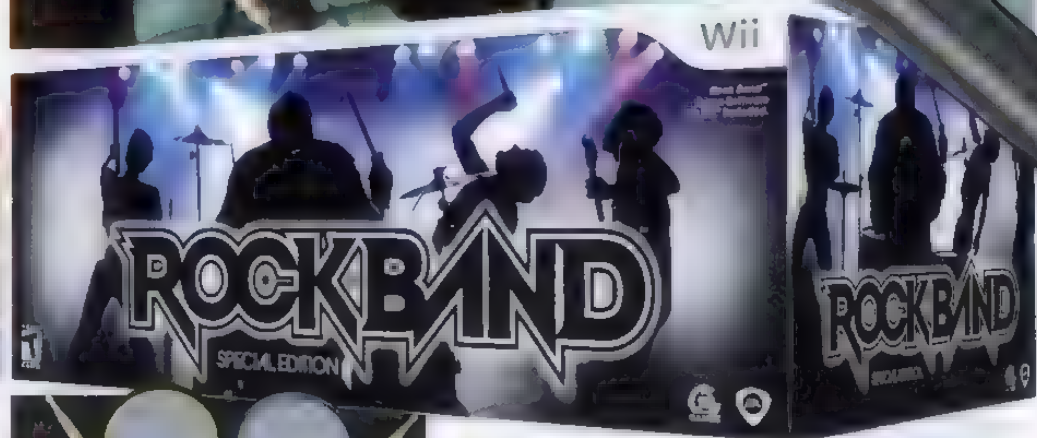
Is the success of a product like *Rock Band* changing Harmonix very much?

It's awesome because people want to give you money. There's no way we could have made a game like *Rock Band* unless we had success. Now we want to put ourselves in a position where we work on innovative stuff, and also capitalise on the stuff that we've made. We want our cake and want to eat it as well. We don't want to be in a position where we haven't got the cycles to expend on blue-sky stuff. There's a lot of internal work to



Rob Kay says that the problems that afflicted the early batches of guitars have since been completely eradicated, which is clearly good news for European gamers preparing to hand over huge sums of cash to get hold of them.





settle the structures to make that happen. For example, having people devoted to research is a basic component of that

What's it like competing against *Guitar Hero*, a series you initially developed?

I don't try to think about competing with other music games, because you just end up at looking at what they're doing. We want to keep looking forward - how to make creating music as accessible as possible. Really, if we're going to compete with anything, it's other forms of entertainment, not other music games.

So is your real competitor iTunes rather than Activision?

I can certainly see people making those comparisons down the line. We see *Rock Band* as a music platform. We want to make that platform a reality, so when people are just listening to music, they're not experiencing everything that any more. We want people to get inside music on a different level.

Does *Rock Band's* DLC make it harder to justify new retail versions and expansion packs?

These are questions we've been dealing with internally. We think the music platform is everything, and that's where we can iterate on it. The games that we do in the future can't break the platform, they have to be complementary. We're working on a bunch of cool ways to take music games in the future, some of them might end up in future games branded *Rock Band*, some of them



At its European launch, *Rock Band* will be an Xbox 360 exclusive (360 hardware pictured here). Meanwhile, in the US, some kind of *Rock Band* sequel is being lined up to appear before Christmas.

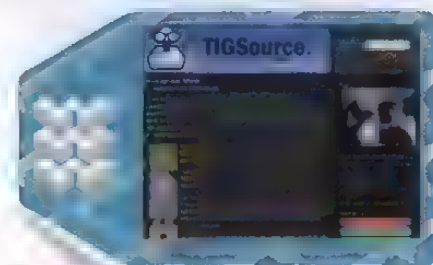
might end up in other stuff. We're most concerned with the continuity of the music. We don't want you to buy a piece of music in *Rock Band* and then find a year down the line it doesn't work any more because people have moved on to something else.

Is DLC changing the way you make games?

The sales figures are really interesting, but I think we're going to be quite guarded about how we let that affect our choices of songs. We don't want the tastes of a few people to dictate how this works. The *Portal* song is niche, but people go crazy for it. That's the thing about digital distribution - it lowers the costs of trying something.

Are there plans for user-generated content in *Rock Band's* future?

It's definitely part of Harmonix's future. One day, all the bands in the world will be able to get their music into a game without us having to be a bottleneck. That's a long-term goal, but we are devoting time to figuring it out.



WEBSITE OF THE MONTH

It's really about as self-explanatory a name as you could come up with. The Independent Gaming Source is a news site and portal about indie gaming established by Derek Yu - one half of the development team behind indie hit *Aquaria*. As well as keeping track of the latest developments in the community, the site has the obligatory forums and has recently added a comprehensive database of indie projects. There's also a fairly expansive back catalogue of editorials and interviews with developers such as Metanet and PomPom Games. An article about Korea's item-based sales model caught our eye - written by Charles Forman in 1995, when it was a trend only just beginning to register in the western consciousness. With TIGSource's founder and many of its contributors now producing commercially viable products, it will be interesting to see if this largely hobbyist community changes.

Site
The Independent Gaming Source
URL
www.tigsource.com



Out of the shadows

The underground demoscene makes the journey to PS3 – thanks to a far-from-underground invite from Sony itself

A flying basset hound may seem more likely to form the basis of a viral YouTube clip to amuse the cubicle-bound than to set message boards buzzing. Yet, when *Linger In Shadows* was unveiled at the demoscene festival Breakpoint08 in Germany, the internet leapt up to speculate, with sites suggesting the footage was everything from a leaked tech display to the first signs of the new Team Ico game. Telling the strange, half-story of a rooftop encounter between

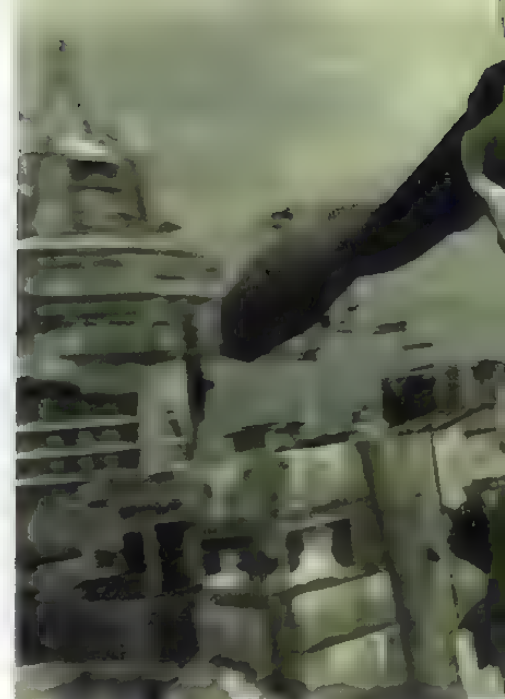
a start of pirated software) before evolving into more elaborate pieces. The ethos was to push hardware to its limits, with many coders getting shockingly good results from C64s and Amigas. "Nowadays the challenge has changed a bit: there's no single platform that can be pushed to the max any more," Felix Bohmann, a Breakpoint organiser, explains. "I guess you could say that it's evolved into a nice mix of technology and art. Some of the original demosceners are still around, and there's still stuff being produced on old-school platforms, but the main development is happening on PC with lots of new, younger sceners involved."

The demoscene and the videogame industry have long been intertwined – besides using the same technology and skills, many European developers started out making demos before they made games. *Linger* is not its first brush with consoles, either: the original Xbox was popular thanks to its compromised security, and PSP, long-time homebrew darling, has hosted work such as *Suicide Barbie*, by The Back Lotus. But what makes Plastic's demo so different is that this time the platform-holder was on board from the start.

"PS3 could very well be the next Amiga if they decide to allow demosceners to really use it. But until they actually give us access to the GPU, not much will happen on PS3"

a cat, a dog, a Sentinel-like robot and a sinister black cloud. *Linger* is in fact the work of Plastic, a Polish demogroup, and rather than a teaser it appears to be something stranger – a demoscene effort funded by a videogame corporation.

The demoscene began in the mid '80s in the form of cracktros (graphical clips hackers put at the

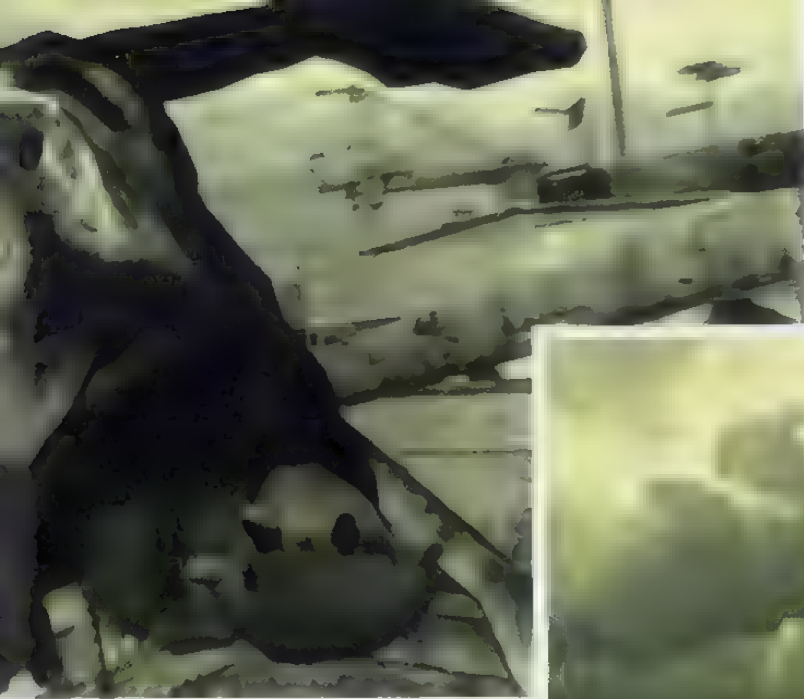


"I think that Sony wanted a real demoscene demo, not altered in any way," says Plastic's lead designer and 'tyrant' Michal Staniszewski, whose team was approached directly by Sony's Santa Monica Studio several years ago. Staniszewski already seems weary of answering questions pertaining to the future of *Linger*, primarily as many news sites assume that it's merely the first glimpse of a bigger project rather than a work in its own right. That doesn't mean he's not willing to tease a little about the demo's future himself: "What you've seen so far is of course not everything. The demo's interactive and the gameplay you'll encounter will be different from any other games." A



Staniszewski says the story behind *Linger In Shadows* "is about an evil I wanted to make an open plot which everyone can interpret in his or her own way." It's a first for PS3, although the demoscene has been alive for years on machines like the C64 (*Error 23*, right) and has recently arrived on PSP (*Suicide Barbie*, above right)



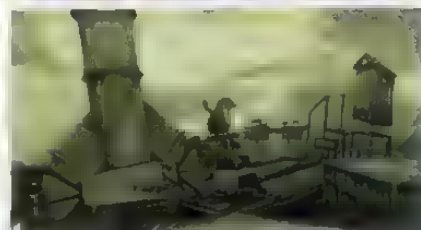


PlayStation Network release for the code is rumoured to be slated for later this year.

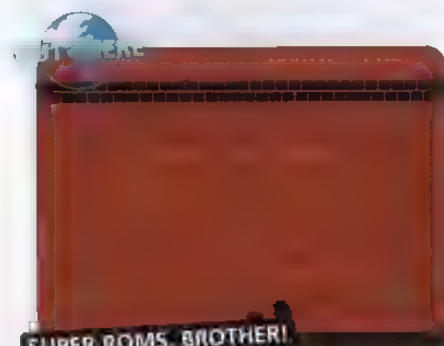
Community responses on boards like Pouet.net are mixed so far, with some worrying that an influx of corporate money could damage the scene. "I think Linger was generally well received, but there was lots of confusion about how or why it came to be," says Bohmann. And if the demo allows Sony to showcase its console's power and establish a kind of underground credibility at the same time, Bohmann feels the company may be missing the point if it treats the demoscene as merely another form of PR. "Personally, I think Sony somewhat got the idea of the demoscene wrong. An 'invite only' demoscene on a closed platform with NDAs is not really going to happen. In general, consoles have always been different—in reality, not too much is happening on the current generation." And asked whether Microsoft's XNA tools may be able to court demosceners more successfully than Sony, Bohmann is equally sceptical. "Demosceners usually don't like managed code, since it's about getting the most out of any given hardware. XNA is a real downer for demosceners I've spoken to."

Even so, and regardless of what eventually happens with Linger (Sony trademarked the name in November 2007, so further developments are not impossible), Sony is already working with other demoscene groups to produce more of the same.

There is real money involved, which makes it even more commercial," sighs Bohmann. Ironically for Sony, the key to getting the real scene going may be to hand over the control rather than the cash. Bohmann. "In my personal opinion, the PS3 could very well become a pretty viable demo platform, since it has lots of processing power and interesting hardware. It could very well be the next Amiga if they decide to allow us demosceners to really use it. But until they actually give us access to the GPU, not too much will happen on PS3. If they want the demoscene for real, they should just let us use the full machine, then they don't even need to pay for demos."



Linger in Shadows has already been favourably compared to *Kilzone 2* in terms of graphical performance, and *Shadow Of The Colossus*, due to its washed-out ambience. "I'm always trying to convince young people to make demos and not games for their portfolios," says Staniszewski. "It's better to have a finished demo than an unfinished game." A worthwhile point



Super Mario Bros isn't only one of the most iconic videogames around, it's also easily the most hacked ROM. They've been cropping up a while now, the likes of *Super Mario Forever* and *Super Mario AI*, and there's even a yearly *Mario ROM Hack* on Selectbutton.net. Not that we encourage these sorts of things, but it is interesting to see something like *Mario Battle No. 1*, which places you in a Mushroom Kingdom devoid of coins, enemies and powerups. All you can do is go for a walk and die—a melancholy quest, to say the least. Or *The Pixel Kingdom*, which gives the game a graphics downgrade. Do your own searching and try a few, then hopefully we'll all be ready to move on to another game.



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INTERVIEW



Ninja theorists Kristensen (far left) and Antoniades emphasize that the studio puts games first

"Tabuu takes notice of the peculiar qualities of Mr Game & Watch's body mass. He uses these particularities to create a nearly infinite number of shadow bugs, which he then uses to create the Subspace Army. However, since Mr Game & Watch does not have any concept of good and evil, he is unaware of the effects caused when he is used in this way."

See *Smash Bros* has it all - throwaway base enemy characters, a plot, and a boss. Plot: A... to the game's... to Masahiro Sakurai at least

"When I'm listed as general producer, it usually means I hardly even opened my mouth to have a say on what went on during the development process." Shigeru Miyamoto gives a little guidance... to read the credits sequence of *Mario Kart*

"Too fucking right I cashed the cheque. I spent too much of my life digging [Douglas] Adams out of holes he got himself into and, just for once, it was nice to get paid."

Michael Bywater, contracted by Infocom to salvage *Rescue* after *The Hobbit*... from development hell, defends his... waxy org publishes the Infocom side of the story

"There's a lot more to America's culture of violence than *Resident Evil 4*."

Clay... books and films, yes Stephen King

"The media should not be the ones answering the questions or defining the reasons why this incident happened."

Team Ninja's Yosuke Hayashi responds to the... wake of attacks... R Am... Station... associated with... den DS

From Cell to celluloid

Would you like a movie to go with that game? Consider it done

With *Heavenly Sword*, Cambridge-based Ninja Theory broke new ground in capturing an actor's performance and unearthing it within a game. Now, with the trials of the PS3 launch period behind it and a contact book thick with Hollywood names, it wants its next project to be both a game and CG feature film. The two made not in sync, but in a single unified process. Design chief Tameem Antoniades and development chief Nina Krstensen set the scene

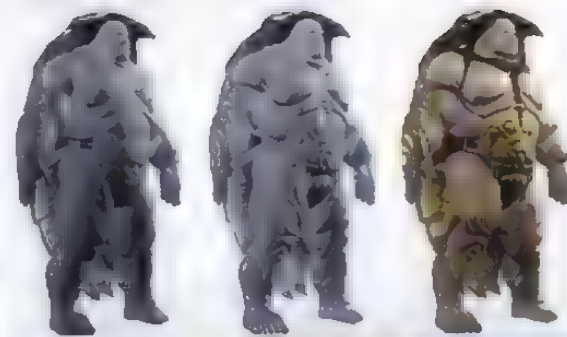
How did this idea of a CG movie come about?

Tameem Antoniades: "I was during the shooting of *Heavenly Sword* in New Zealand. When we were at WETA Digital. Because that's one of Peter Jackson's studios, he would pop in and see how things were going. One day, when he was watching the shoot, he went up to Andy Serkis, star of *Heavenly Sword*, and said 'You've already shot the equivalent of a movie - why not shoot a few extra scenes and release it as one?' I just thought that was insane at the time. It was hard enough just doing the shoot there and then let alone thinking about a game and a film

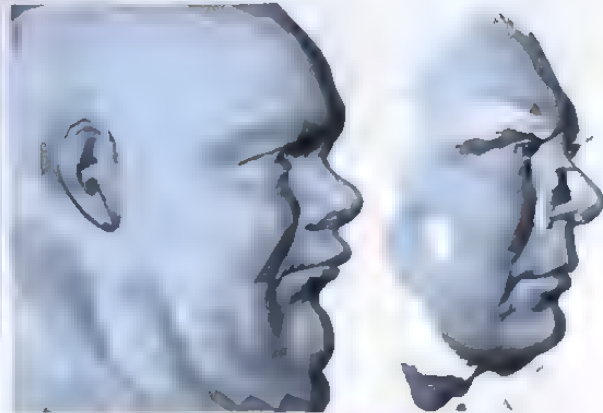
But it's an idea that's been in the background since then. And it makes a lot of sense. If you were shooting the scenes for a film and a game simultaneously, the costs would be drastically reduced - you'd be using the same crew, the same cast and, because you can edit or place your cameras however you want, you could make two interpretations of the same story. We got pretty good results on *Heavenly Sword* with turning actors' performances into realistic dramatic content. We thought we'd kinda cracked a really big nut. And creating all the scenes was actually quite smooth. It didn't affect the game side of things, it ran in parallel. If a movie studio wanted to pick up a CG film using game technology, why not? Why not do them both together?



"On *Heavenly Sword*, we were severely restricted by the PlayStation 3," says Antoniades, possibly causing Sony reps to combust. "But a lot of the restrictions that were on the PS3 aren't in place right now on DirectX 10 and the PCs you get nowadays"



Ninja Theory's next game, a multiplatform title, will scale its assets down to its target hardware. The movie will not be the studio's first foray into film: a series of making-of episodes accompanied *Heavenly Sword*, while an external company produced an animated series.



Nina Kristensen: On PS3, obviously, it all had to run in realtime. But if you were going to render out a movie, you could still use the engine but render it out frame by frame, in crisp fidelity. We had troubles with shadows and things like that, with artefacting. You could completely wipe that out with a render.

We spoke to David Braben a while ago about his multimedia plans for *The Outsider*. It seemed quite hypothetical, and possibly more appropriate for a live-action production than a CG movie.

TA: This is the problem. A lot of people talk about the game studio doing the game and the film studio doing the film. But a lot of

"We got pretty good results on *Heavenly Sword* with turning actors' performances into realtime dramatic content; we thought we'd kinda cracked a really big nut"

these collaborations – [correcting himself] these simultaneous developments – aren't actually collaborative. Usually, the film's in production and the game is borrowing assets that cannot be used in realtime – they have to be recreated from scratch. The music you can use piecemeal in the game, but you have to compose a whole lot of extra stuff because you're doing a ten- or 30-hour experience. We can bring on an editor, director or producer for the film side and do everything else – we've got the contacts – internally.

We've seen what things like *Beowulf* are doing with performance-capture, and think we can take a more stylistic approach and create something comparable, if not better. We think it's within our grasp. But there's no precedent for it so we don't know where it's going to go.

Might some people see this as an admission of defeat when it comes to integrating narrative content into games?

TA: Films are good at certain things that games aren't. You can spend a lot of time in scenes playing out the drama, which you wouldn't do in a game because you want to get back into the action. But there's all the stuff you can do in games, like *Bioshock*, about finding out the history of the world, the story and the background that you can't do in films. So I think there's potential in both. I wouldn't say that it leads necessarily to failure.

Is the idea to create a model where this kind of joint development is entirely risk-free?

NK: We – we don't actually need to make the decision about whether the film's going ahead until we do the performance capture shoot. Obviously, the script has to be prepared in advance of that, but

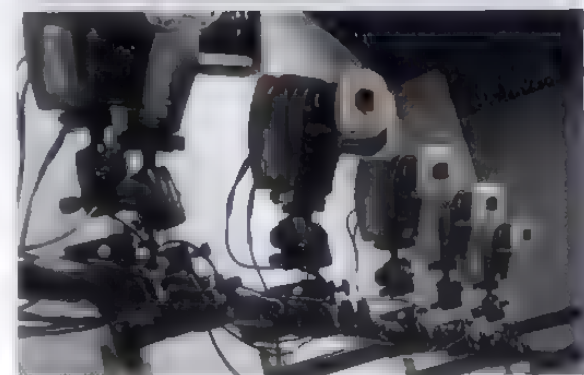
the decision doesn't have to be made for quite some time yet, we won't be doing the shoot until next year. So we're getting established in the game first.

We're a game studio first and foremost, and the game will always be the most important thing, but film's a nice opportunity. But if we're releasing a game and a movie at the same time, the question is which one gets most of the marketing budget? I don't know, actually. The idea is that they're complementary, and will build a long-term franchise and universe that we could do a lot of interesting things with. If it doesn't happen this time round then we're not going to be heartbroken. But it is quite frankly very, very cool.

*Antomades and Kristensen discuss Ninja Theory's ambitions, together with the state of the gaming nation, in *IGN's* Next Gen '07*



Whether the actor playing the part of *Heavenly Sword*'s Roach (left) shares the character's full figure is not for us to speculate. Meanwhile, below, the motion-capture actress playing Whiptail has far too much fun for our liking.





INTERVIEW

As the hammer falls

Warhammer Online's developers explain their experimental approach, and ponder the future direction of MMOGs

As *Warhammer Online: Age Of Reckoning* begins its final turn of development, executive producer **Jeff Hickman** (right) explains which of its ideas will survive the MMOG minefield.

Age Of Reckoning's been in development for a few years now. How does the game you have now compare to the one you set out to make?

The core of the game, the fundamental things we always planned, well, if you look at the design documents we started with, you'll recognise the game we have today. The biggest changes we've made are things like the Tome of Knowledge. That

came into existence through a spark of genius within the company. Public quests were the same way. As we were playing through the game, as we were experimenting, we thought, 'What if we did this?' But the core of the game, how realms work, how the campaign works, it's exactly what we had in the pre-production documents.

The multiple ways you can level a character remind us of the original plan to abandon levels completely from the game. They seem like the ghosts of that idea.

They are, they are. Doing a no-level system, and

"With an MMOG, you constantly fight against the need for narrative, and the push against it by players or designers who don't think it's important. You have to balance it"

being able to balance the game around them, is extremely difficult. Not that it can't be done, but it's worth it to do it? It sounds like a great idea, but there's definitely something to be said in a social game for being able to look at someone's level. You need comparison factors in the game – it's supremely important.

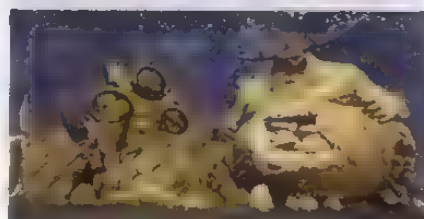
What do you think will be the idea that everyone will steal from Age Of Reckoning?

Public quests. Absolutely.

Just strolling into an area and taking part with an ongoing quest, no grouping, no instance.

Can you believe no one thought of it before? Paul Barnett (the company's creative director) puts it an excellent way. He says you recognise it as genius because it's one of those things that when you see it for the first time you go, 'Oh, of course' – think it would be absolutely ludicrous for public quests, or something like them, to not be adopted by every MMO from this point forth.

And they dare to call MMOG players 'geeks'. Clearly images like this are going to do little to draw in the inquisitive masses, but it should hold well with those already in the know. Finding that middle ground is going to be an important challenge for Mythic.



There seems to be a real depth of narrative in Age Of Reckoning that's perhaps missing from most online games.

It's a hard role in an MMOG. You constantly fight against the need for narrative, and the push against it by players or designers who don't think that it's important. You have to balance out the impact on the game. So what we've done is tied it in to the Tome of Knowledge. So we have this great narrative. There's, I believe, a prologue and 22 chapters for every race. As you move through the game, physically, you'll get a 'Tome Unlock' bloom – you've entered chapter three. You open up your Tome and sure enough, there's all the information about chapter three. All the information about public quests there, about the rewards you can gain in that chapter by gaining influence, and two or three pages of the story behind that chapter, which is cool because it tells the story about the things that are happening around you. You read the story, and then you go do the quests, and it all ties together. So, you don't have to read the story. But if you open up the Tome and read a couple of pages each chapter, it really makes it very fulfilling. It ties together so well. We try to keep quest text fairly short, and try to tie it in to the narrative of each chapter, and then if we have a lot of lengthy text we put that in the Tome. We start to tell this story that Warhammer players have previously had to imagine.



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Experiments in ludogeography

In *This Gaming Life: Travels In Three Cities*, Jim Rossignol takes you on a winding tour of the borderless, ever-extending videogaming landscape

Part personal history, part travel narrative, part philosophical reflection on the meaning of games. So says the blurb on the back cover of *This Gaming Life*, a compilation of essays by occasional *Edge* contributor Jim Rossignol – and perhaps this is another way of saying that the book doesn't really establish a clear focus, neither outlining precisely what it is nor who it is for. Moving from the cover illustration – a map depicting Sony and Nintendo – through the first essay, it's not even obvious how the subtitle, *Travels in Three Cities*, relates to its subject.

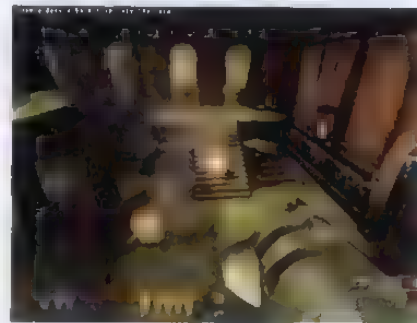
'Videogames still represent a fascinating, ostentatious landscape of experiences that were not previously available to us. Perhaps we have boredom to thank for that'

matter in any profound way. While engaging enough, for a book concerning geography, it is a little poor at or entering.

Despite the need for an introduction, however, *This Gaming Life* is a richly informed and eloquent read that ultimately inspires. Rossignol begins with a series of justifications for gaming, pitched at the kind of people who probably won't be reading the book – ie non-gamers. It makes for a slow start, as Rossignol explains terminology and unpacks the clichés and slang terms familiar to the initiated. His tone is necessarily measured as he constructs an image of gaming as something individually positive and culturally worthwhile. Though things like hand-eye coordination and serious games are brought up, Rossignol's most beguiling argument is that games stave off boredom. This is far from a frivolous task. He suggests: Boredom has been an



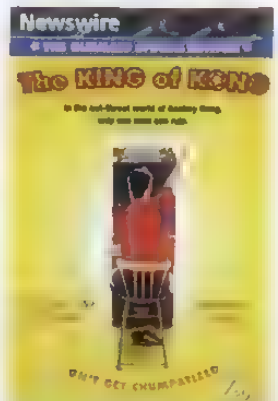
Rossignol compares mod-making to grieving, suggesting that the malicious mayhem of *World of Warcraft's* Plague is also creative



Quake III, writes Rossignol, led to the loss of a job, but far from being a disaster it resulted in a life-changing epiphany

occupation on a rapid increase since the term was first found in English in the late 18th century. Bertrand Russell described it as 'one of the motive powers through the historical epoch', and JG Ballard was terrified of a boring future in which humanity had exhausted its possible variety of experience. Rossignol sees videogames as our saviour from this state: videogames still represent a fascinating, ostentatious landscape of experiences that were not previously available to us. Perhaps we have boredom to thank for that.

The subsequent essays tie more closely to the geographical theme, passing through London, Seoul, and Reykjavik. The Big Smoke essay talks, sometimes rather movingly, about how games have constructed and reconstructed lives, discussing in interview the geneses of designers and industry notables such as *Splish*, *Damage's* Paul Wedgwood and *Traveler's Tales'* Jonathan Smith. Subsequent essays take in Korean pro-gaming, muse on the varying success of games that attempt to shape our political understanding of the world, dwell at some length on Rossignol's pet subject, *Eve Online*, and discuss how players creatively alter their game experiences through mods and griefer. If Rossignol's book is, taken as whole, a little meandering and a little indistinct in its purpose, then its individual parts are well worth scrutiny – there is a wealth of knowledge imparted here, quietly and without bombast. Rossignol strikes you as above all an earnest author, whose passion for his subject never leads him to lecture or hector the reader, who he assumes does not share his enthusiasm, but instead he takes them with him on the intellectual journey, whatever circuitous route that may take.



Cabinet kings

Following the intertwined fates of *Donkey Kong* high-scorers Steve Wiebe and Billy Mitchell, *The King Of Kong* is a film following their keenly fought competition for the world record. You suspect it may have been cut to exacerbate the drama (which does Mitchell few favours), but there's little denying that it's a riveting view into a dedicated corner of competitive videogames and the kind of Kong-sized egos that lurk there. To celebrate its UK DVD release on June 16, the film's publisher Revolver Entertainment is going to organise a day of retrogaming and a public attempt on the world record itself (details of places and times to follow on our blog at next-gen.biz).

Continue

In the bounds of Liberty City, you understand

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but don't expect so much on the aerobics front

Alan Sugar is even scarier in Jumbo Pixel Vision

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INCOMING

New games, and updates on games already on the radar

Gears Of War 2

FORMAT 360 PUBLISHER MICROSOFT



The latest mission for Phoenix and Cole, beyond shoring up 360's line-up almost singlehandedly, to rescue Cole's daughter from a richer story, wider battle, and apparently highly ambitious sequel

Mafia II

FORMAT 360, PC, PS3 PUBLISHER 2K GAMES



Nabbing its cover system from the game on the left, the follow up to 2002's cult hit boasts extensive vehicle damage, a world twice as large, and a whole new story accessible to newcomers

Tom Clancy's HAWX

FORMAT 360, PC, PS3 PUBLISHER UB SOFT



With Tom Clancy's HAWX likely to induce un-American giggles, high-altitude warfare becomes a four-letter word. Perhaps the online co-op, PVP modes and 50 included aircraft are the X factor

Sonic Unleashed

FORMAT 360, PS2, PS3, WI PUBLISHER SEGA



So, who will it be? Flashy fluffykins, 3D drunk or trash-talking twit? The 2D plane and simple goal – cleaning up Robotnik's mess – suggest the first: the time-sensitive combat system, however

Dance Battle Audition

FORMAT PC PUBLISHER SILENCE AUDITION



Consider yourself warned: a 'special pink tour bus' is scouring the country for Audition virgins, as if 300 million users weren't enough. The free dance sensation is online at goad audition.co.uk

Resistance 2

FORMAT PS3 PUBLISHER SCEI



The teaser trailer – all one shot of it – is a great slice of supposed realtime, even if the prospect of yet another alien invasion has you running for cover. At least Insomniac has its tech in check

Mario Super Sluggers

FORMAT WI PUBLISHER NINTENDO



Circle the dining table with the Munchuck, chant 'entooasms' with the A button, and smash their brains out with the Remote. Not really. This time, an Italian finds the correct use for a baseball bat

Cooking Mama 2: Dinner With Friends

FORMAT DS, WI PUBLISHER 505 GAMES



Fans of scandalously priced fish parcels rejoice: the world's most offensive game is at your service. Available since February, the DS cook 'em up can now be played for free at your local Yo! Sushi

Baroque

FORMAT PS2, WI PUBLISHER RISING STAR



Another month, another JRPG arrives months after its US release. This time, it's Atlus' highly customisable dungeon crawl in which death, thanks to its unique storyline, is anything but the end

INTERNET GAME OF THE MONTH

Karoshi, Japanese for 'death from over-work', is one of the most appropriately named internet games we've ever seen: the phrase contains the game's ultimate objective, but pretty accurately pokes fun at how players will feel after wading through some of its more frustrating moments. In short, you have to try and kill yourself on each stage.

Always the same objective, never the same method – and the game begins to play hard and fast with its own rules, making it resemble nothing as much as a Viz Suicidal Syd strip

Some levels simply require lateral thinking. Some need you to 'get' something in the visual design. Some simply stump you for hour upon frustrating hour, until you realise the answer's right there. Whatever its other failings, *Karoshi 2.0* has the important quality of making you think about what you're doing, with a side helping of some wicked humour.

Creator Jesse Venbrux's original is also included in the *Karoshi 2.0* package, plus a time-attack mode and other goodies like a stage builder. Knock yourself out. No, really

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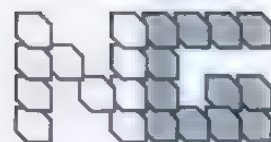
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NEXT
GENERATION

This month's guide to Edge's online home

Are games immoral?

Tanya Byron's recent report on game ratings in the UK has stirred up further attention from commentators that only see in them antisocial aggression and encouragements of reclusive behaviour. Next-Gen sets aside its natural disdain for such notions to consider whether it's right that so many of us spend our leisure hours in violent alternative worlds. Do videogames have a morally sensitive dimension that's too often overlooked?

www.next-gen.biz/moral

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Big bosses

The top 20 gaming publishers of the last 12 months

Which publishing companies have made the biggest impact over the past 12 months, and which are set to have a great year ahead?

These are the questions posed in Next-Gen's annual survey of the game industry, which ranks the top 20 companies according to their global financial and creative success.

For the past two years, the survey has pulled together statistics such as average review scores, the sales figures of their prestige titles, the number of successes among their attempts to bring new IPs to market, how many staff they employ and, perhaps most importantly, their profitability. The aim? To find out which publishers are moving up and which are on the way down.

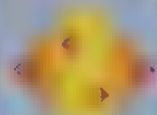
As much as the worldwide videogame market has expanded over the last 12 months, many publishers have experienced roller-coaster rides. Amid conglomeration, profit warnings and threats of hostile takeovers, the biggest companies are doing all they can to consolidate their leads. This is a

www.next-gen.biz/publishers2009

ACTIVISION

Nintendo

SONY



COMPUTER

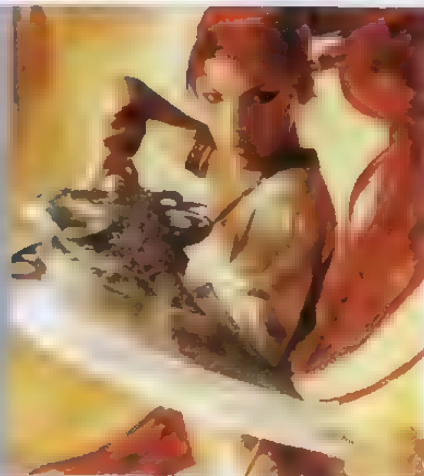
T2

Microsoft
game studios

EDGE CONTENT AND BLOG

If you've missed a recent issue of Edge, you can now head to Next-Gen to read and discuss a selection of features, reviews and previews from the magazine. And, on the Edge blog, you'll find extra interviews, reports and news that we can't fit on these pages. Recent entries include:

- An interview with Bethesda's Pete Hines on *Fallout 3*, which includes his thoughts on why the developer's been concentrating so hard on presenting the combat side of the game, and not its rich story and setting
- More from our interview with Ninja Theory's Tameem Antoniou and Nina Kristensen on the studio's ambitions for creating both a game and CG movie as part of the same production process, plus a look back at the development of *Heavenly Sword* and the troubled PlayStation 3 launch.



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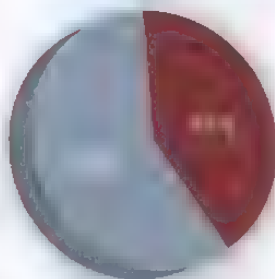
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Industry

FOCUS



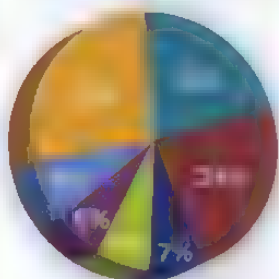
European DS active gamers gender ratio



MALE ■
FEMALE ■

Source: GameVision autumn 2007

European DS active gamers share of age range



6-9 YRS ■
10-14 YRS ■
15-19 YRS ■
20-24 YRS ■
25-29 YRS ■
30-34 YRS ■
35+ YRS ■

Source: GameVision autumn 2007

In association with Screen Digest

Here come the girls

Analyst Piers Harding-Rolls discusses the ranks of young girl gamers that have prompted growth in the handheld and online gaming markets

Teens and pre-teens or 'tweens' (eight to 12-year-olds) have always had an important role in consuming gaming media, from the very first arcade cabinets and home entertainment systems in the '70s and '80s, through to the Nintendo and Sega consoles of the '90s and more recently the Game Boy and its later iterations. But following the launch of the PlayStation in the mid-'90s, much of the sector's expansion was driven by the adoption of consoles and

strategic move as the market reached the peak of the PS2 cycle during 2004.

Actually, at this time Nintendo, although failing to effectively compete with the adult male-centred home consoles, was already delivering on a strategy to increase kids' spending on games through its handheld devices. While Sony and Microsoft started a front battling for the 'core' gamer, Nintendo maintained a link to its early consoles and new generations of young gamers through its handheld devices. In its most recent cycle of handheld devices – the DS and DS Lite – Nintendo has successfully delivered on market growth by massively expanding its addressable market. Crucially, much of this expansion has come from the conversion of tween female consumers into device-based gamers. The DS in Europe is a female-dominated platform, with a majority of those female users being teenagers or pre-teens.

Girls' participation in the growing handheld market has propelled the DS towards being the most popular platform in gaming history

spending on games by older consumers as games became more adult-friendly and increasingly targeted at what was to become known as the 'core' gamer – generally male, 18-35 years old and with a large disposable income, much of which was lavished on games.

The release of the PS2 maintained this trend, and the console proved fantastically successful in courting the 18-35 male gamer, while Nintendo's GameCube failed to realise its ambition of gaining market share through a more kid-oriented offering. Plotting market expansion based on increased gaming by younger consumers seemed to be the wrong

Now, in 2008, it is crystal clear that girls are fast becoming a very important consumer in the gaming market – we could say the girl gamer has come of age. Their participation in the growing handheld market has propelled the DS towards being the most popular platform in gaming history – recent research from Media Create in Japan indicated that 100 million DS software units have been sold in the territory, all in just three years and five months. While the PS2 has also managed the



Wildly popular DS game *Nintendogs*, released in three different versions to encourage collecting, racked up sales of over 168,000 units on its first week on sale in Japan, and the launch boosted DS system sales by over 4.2 times to 95,000 units, up from 22,000 the week before



BarbieGirls.com (above) is an MMOG based on a certain popular doll range. Cross marketing rewards real-world Mattel purchases with in-game currency. Stardoll (left) and Webkinz World (above left) are similar, based around toy lines both real and virtual

same feat in recent times, the platform took a further year to reach the same target. Although the DS has a wide spread of users, much of its software has sold to tween female gamers.

While the DS is evidence of mass participation of girls in the device-led games market, there are substantial developments in other areas of the industry that highlight the numbers of young females playing games. Of particular interest is the evolution of the kid-targeted persistent social networking virtual world, or MMOG. Since the early 2000s there has been a steady introduction of sites, including Habbo (formerly Habbo Hotel), Neopets and Club Penguin, that cater to young gamers.

While in traditional MMOGs users are predominantly male, in these social-networking-driven communities the male to female ratio is normally pretty equal, or even sometimes weighted towards the girl gamer. All three of these sites have been hugely popular and also financially successful – so much so in the case of Club Penguin that Disney was prompted to splash \$350m in cash acquiring the site (with the contingency for a further \$350m based on future earnings) to add to its portfolio of kid-targeted online games and sites.

Aside from these online social worlds targeted at kids in general, there are also plenty of examples of game worlds and sites that are specifically made for girls

Stardoll – a Swedish virtual paper doll site – attracts six million unique users a month and, according to ComScore in August 2007, was the leading destination out of the top 1,000 sites on the web for girls aged nine to 17. Girl gaming is also being heavily exploited by major toy manufacturers that are seeking to extend toy brands beyond that of the store purchase. Mattel and Ganz have been quick to develop Barbie and Webkinz-based virtual worlds that connect directly and in an ongoing fashion with the girl consumer. The success of these sites is testament to the growing interest in online games from tween girls, and underlines that games are an effective medium to court the young female consumer.

So if the last few years have witnessed the massmarket girl gamer coming of age, which of the TV console manufacturers is best placed to take advantage of this burgeoning opportunity? Well, it is clear that Nintendo is already delivering on the girl gamer opportunity to a certain degree with the Wii. However, as proven by the amount of girls using the DS, there is further scope for expansion and for home console hardware to align even more strongly with young female consumers. As such, the door is open for all three manufacturers to release content targeted at girls and make more significant inroads into a growing segment of gamers that have yet to be fully addressed by the home console.



Neopets user demographic profile

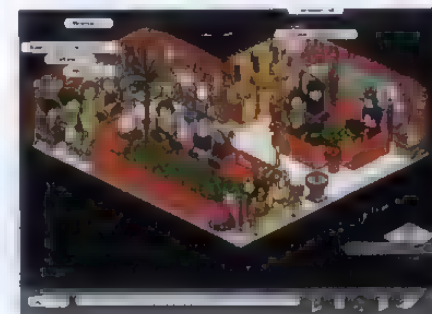


Source: Neopets

Habbo user demographic profile



Source: Sulake



Habbo is a social networking website built from isometric chatrooms in the form of a hotel. User pages are linked to these rooms, and each user is represented by a customisable avatar



SOMETHING ABOUT

JAPANESE

Western promises

Famitsu's Koji Aizawa looks at the changing opinion of western games in Japan

Games from overseas, and particularly European games, are often labelled with the term 'yoge' here in Japan. It's a portmanteau: 'yo' comes from 'seiyou', meaning western, while the 'ge' sound comes from 'game'. The word was coined by Sony when discussing the very first PlayStation – and there was certainly no

negative connotation attached to it. At the time, it was common to call music from the US and Europe 'yougaku', again a compound word formed from the Japanese word for western and 'gaku', meaning sound. Since western music was very popular in Japan, it seemed that to term western games as yoge carried over some of the positive feeling from that other medium.

But this changed. Go back more than ten years and while there were plenty of decent and original titles emerging from the west, many were visually rougher than their Japanese counterparts – the general opinion that Japanese players formed of games from abroad was a low one. It wasn't helped by the fact that, during the first half of the PlayStation's lifecycle, publishers had the attitude

It's clear that there is still a long way to go before western games succeed in Japan in simple commercial terms. But in terms of how western games are perceived, the situation has changed dramatically among the hardcore

that you could shove whatever you liked at players and they would just lap it up. The perception was that this was particularly true for western publishers in Japan, who released a huge number of titles which lacked appeal. Yoge came to mean 'crap' – and, as you say in the west, 'shit sticks'. It's been hard for the west to shake this image

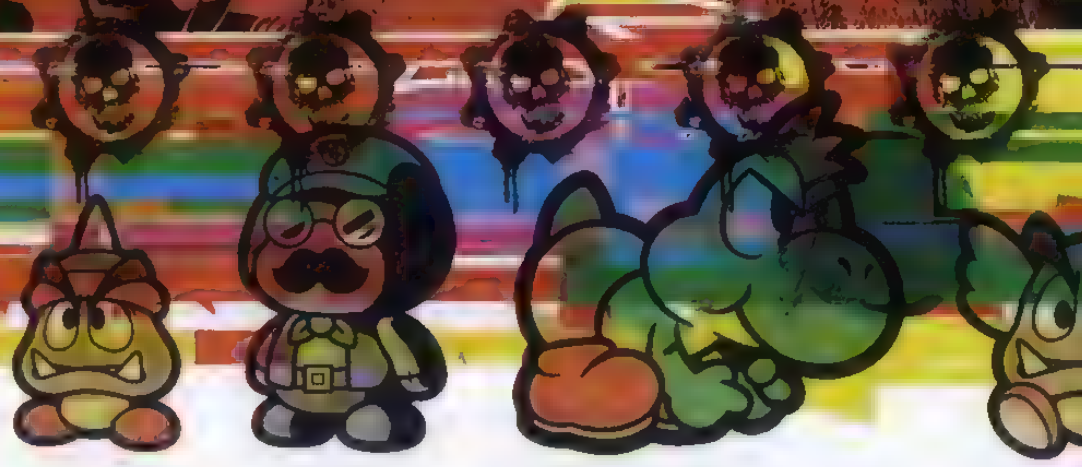
A decade later, however, and the situation is changing, albeit slowly. The PS3 has reached two million units here in Japan, but that's substantially better than the Xbox 360, which is still languishing around the 600,000 unit mark. A game like *Halo 3* sold 80,000 copies. Others, like *The Elder Scrolls IV Oblivion* or *Gears Of War*, have only just hit 70,000 copies. Looking at such figures, it's clear that there

is still a long way to go before western games succeed in Japan in simple commercial terms. But in terms of how western games are perceived, the situation has changed fairly dramatically among the hardcore.

In *Weekly Famitsu*, we have a ranking established by the readers' feedback. In 2007



Kingdom Hearts II topped Famitsu's readers' poll in 2007. Will a western-produced game appear in the top slot any time soon?



Kingdom Hearts II Final Mix+ and Super Paper Mario were first with 9.17 points. But God Of War II came in third with 9.13 points, in fourth we had three titles with 9.07 points: Gears Of War, The Legend Of Zelda: Phantom Hourglass and Minna no Golf Portable 2. GTA: San Andreas was seventh and The Elder Scrolls IV: Oblivion was tenth. In terms of quality, western games are now highly considered among gamers in Japan – and when you compare this to the rankings of the past five years, when no western game managed to make the top five, it's clear that things are changing fast. Even if, at this stage, such rankings only indicate the feelings of core gamers, it's inevitable that the fortunes of western games will improve in the Japanese market overall. While such games still see substantial success in Japan, then they do outside there are more and more that manage to hit the 100,000 mark. Nonetheless, there is much that western games need to do in order to increase

their appeal to the Japanese. It's not just about the package and character design, either – it's pretty common to find manuals with really poor localization, and the fact that many western series are published by different companies here in Japan for each sequel means there is less of a guarantee of consistency in the end product. But, as you know, the environment for game development has become borderless. It can't be very long before calling a foreign game yoge will make no sense whatsoever, and not just because the production of such games will be an international effort – as our game developers here become increasingly keen to develop for a worldwide audience. It seems like western products will become difficult to distinguish from those we create ourselves. Putting all these things together, I feel the day that an overseas title hits 300,000, 500,000 or even a million copies is not very far away.



**Weekly Famitsu (Enterbrain)
Japanese sales: March 31-April 6**

- Game/weekly sales/lifetime sales**
1. *Monster Hunter Portable 2* (Capcom, PSP): 552,701 (1,375,966)
 2. *Musou Orochi* (Koei, PS2): 220,440 (New entry)
 3. *Star Ocean 2 Second Evolution* (Square Enix, PSP): 90,120 (NE)
 4. *Pro Yakyu Spirit 5* (Konami, PS2): 80,254 (NE)
 5. *Pokemon Ranger Batonage* (Pokemon Company, DS): 56,041 (400,031)
 6. *Pro Yakyu Spirit 5* (Konami, PS3): 49,663 (NE)
 7. *Tottado! Yowiko No Mujintou Seikatsu* (BNG, DS): 40,620 (NE)
 8. *Wii Fit* (Nintendo, Wii): 36,996 (1,799,189)
 9. *Smash Brothers X* (Nintendo, Wii): 22,990 (1,577,842)
 10. *Deca Sports* (Hudson, Wii): 17,999 (107,544)

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All replies received by 3rd July 2008 will be entered into the prize draw. To access the survey, go to:

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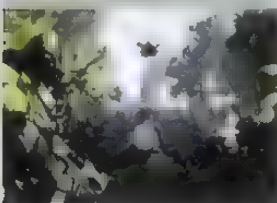
Password: BG2 Closing date: Thursday 3rd July 2008

Hype

The future of electronic entertainment

Edge's most wanted

Haze



We can't decide if we will prefer smacking peasants into space with our mighty drug-enhanced Mantel arms or laying vicious booby-traps to scupper the evil corporate scum. PS3, LB SOFT

LostWinds



If you've lost wind, does that make you dis-gusted? There've been few exciting WiiWare titles announced, but Frontier's airy platformer may well be the service's saviour. Wii, FRONTIER DEVELOPMENTS

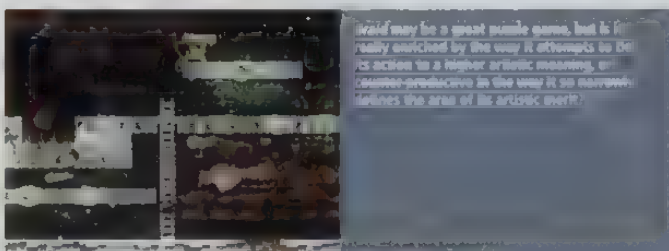
Yakuza Kenzan



No koto music and cherry blossom here: It may be set in 17th century Japan, but the third Yakuza game looks and sounds totally street, yo. Who can resist hip-hop samurai? PS3, SEGA

Message failure

Why games shouldn't try to mimic existing artforms



When *Braid* comes attached to a verbal narrative that is so self-consciously inchoate, so knowingly indirect in its attachment to the actual gameplay, it's as if a big neon sign has lit up 'Pay me heed, for I am art!' Similarly, Jason Rohrer's game, *Passage*, by virtue of being entirely unenjoyable as an actual game, is transparently a didactic experience about the transience of life

As de from the fact that this is self-important and condescending, by so labouring the message it distracts from videogames' existing virtues, damaging the argument that Rohrer and *Braid*'s designer, Jonathan Blow champion, that games can be artistically valuable. In *Braid*'s case it does this by annexing 'artistic' value to an aspect of the game that is wholly derivative of other media text. This is not the way to elicit games' intellectual potential. Meaning for games should not be appended by a clumsy meta-narrative – it should be drawn from interaction – as *Braid* achieves with searing success only in its final level. What's beautiful about the way games can do this is that such meaning is entirely optional, players select their level of engagement.

Crackdown, for most people, would seem to offer little in terms of art, as silly and entertaining a game as it was. Spend hundreds of hours, however, traversing the cityscape in pursuit of that final elusive agility orb, and you begin to appreciate the real world in a new way. You can't help but plot routes up churches, and think about the order in which you'd navigate a set of skyscrapers.

It's an effect that has been explored in the 'legitimised context' of a gallery. Edinburgh's Fruitmarket Gallery exhibited Alex Hartley's work last year – including a series of photographs that sought to plot climbing routes up and around everyday structures. Whereas gallery visitors will come to conclusions about architecture having been instructed to muse on the artistic value of Hartley's work, *Crackdown* manages to bring you to this very experience without being necessarily aware of it as artistically valid thought.

Believing that games can only be valuable when there is some kind of overt metaphor or message undermines their core value – indulging the player with new experiences, and through this, inspiring new ideas.



32

Fallout 3

36x, PC, PS3



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Ninja Gaiden 2

360

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Warhammer Online: Age Of Reckoning

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Darksiders: Wrath Of War

360, PS3



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Red Faction Guerrilla

360, PC, PS3

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Don King Presents: Prizefighter

360, DS, Wii

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Soul Calibur IV

360, ARCADE, PS3

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Brind

360, PC

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Sonic Chronicles: The Dark Brotherhood

DS

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Guitar Hero: On Tour

DS



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Saints Row II

360

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Persona 4

PS2

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Baja

360, PS3

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They

360, PS3

48

50 Cent: Blood On The Sand

360, PS3



FORMAT: 360, PC, PS3
 PUBLISHER: BETHESDA SOFTWORKS
 DEVELOPER: IN HOUSE
 ORIGIN: US
 RELEASE: AUTUMN
 PREVIOUSLY IN: £179



Fallout 3

We take another sojourn into Bethesda's bleak world of guns, ghouls and Geiger counters



The earlier *Fallout* games were commended for witty dialogue and branching conversation trees. Often, dialogue was able to take the narrative in significantly different directions – Hines says *Fallout 3* will follow suit

War never changes. grumbles ubiquitous voiceover favourite Ron Perlman. In *Fallout 3*'s opening cinematic. Of course, the one major bugbear among diehard fans of previous turn-based *Fallout* games is that war has actually changed rather substantially with the coming sequel. Thankfully, as we see more and more of the game, it seems like these detractors are misguided. A recent review had Bethesda's VP of marketing **Pete Hines** on hand to take us through the dark satire of *Fallout 3*'s post-apocalyptic wastelands, demonstrating both the realtime and suspended-time combat modes at the expense of some hapless mutants. The arterial spray that resulted should satisfy both the desire for visceral action and tactical play, even if it fails to tickle those hampered by irrational levels of nostalgia.

Hines took us through the entrails of a building left to dereliction, now home to some unsightly squatters – one of what Hines promises will be a fair variety of dungeon types to be found in the wasteland. Pacing through the dank, rotting corridors, nearby enemies were marked as red blips on

the compass – the proximity from which they can be detected depending on the player's perception stat. One lurched out of the dark with a gargle, just in time for Hines to rattle off a sub-machine gun clip into its withered hide. The next encounter, which saw Hines beset by two staggering radiation-zombies known as ghouls, was dealt with using the Vault-Tec Assisted Targeting System (or VATS).

Bethesda's soft on to the lack of pure turn-based combat. Freezing time, Hines was able to flick through the various enemies queuing up shots on multiple ghouls. Having selected your targets, the view switches to an external camera, swooping in on the bullet-riddled bodies as they fly back in slow motion. A later encounter against some super-mutants, fought in a warren of dugouts lying between the shattered remnants of the Washington Monument and the Capitol building, illustrated how useful VATS can be, tipping off Hines to the presence of an enemy sneaking up behind.

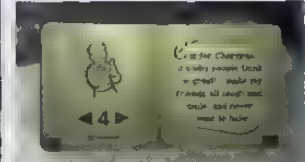
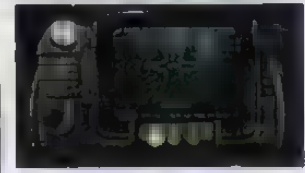
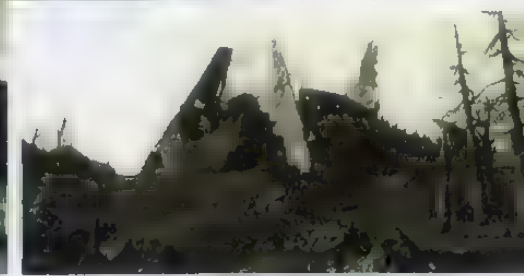
While its combat credentials are fairly secure – previous demonstrations have done little to assure us that the writing is also up to the standard of previous *Fallout* games. Although this viewing focused largely on combat, we were shown developments to the opening section of the game, which sees the player growing up in a nuclear shelter this time witnessing the protagonist's surprise tenth birthday party. It's a section designed to introduce the player to the kind of social interactions – depth of conversation, dialogue and consequences that Hines tells us persist throughout the later game.

Talking to a girl of the same age, the player has the opportunity to lie about just how surprising the surprise party was, along with a number of other options ranging from





The hope is that the player will use a mixture of realtime and VATS combat during the game – the former is always available, regardless of whether you have just spent all your action points in VATS, but the more you use realtime combat, the slower your action points return



As in turn-based combat, the probability of a successful shot is determined by your stats, and the number of shots you can take is limited by how many action points your character possesses. If you get in close, melee weapons do heavy damage

complimentary to ungraciously hostile "Your speech skill, your ability to talk to people, will determine whether things like that have a better chance of being successful," says Hines, pointing out that, at the age of ten, the player's speech skill is pretty low. "In this case, when you see she says 'Oh you're such a liar' – walking around the room, Hines

variety of different options here. I can wuss out and give it to him, I can ask him if we can share, I can spit on it and give it to him, I can tell him to go suck his head, I can insult his mom – so we give the player a lot of choices and how Butch will react depends upon these different choices, so if I choose one of these, last two options he basically gets up to fight me."

Later, Hines talks about the significance of these kinds of decisions in the game. "It's not always about one specific choice that opens one door and closes another, it's more about your character's karma – the culmination of all the quests and your actions but depends on those quests. Just how you're playing the game affects, how the world sees you – it'll determine how they respond and react to you, and whether they will help you out or sell you things or be willing to join you."

"It's not always about one specific choice that opens one door and closes another, it's more about your character's karma – the culmination of all the quests and your actions"

explains that, eventually, everyone in it will be talking to each other – and hopefully about more pertinent things than the characters of Bethesda's *Elder Scrolls IV: Oblivion*, so many of which seemed to be preoccupied by their personal animosities towards crabs. "This is the Vault boy, Butch, and his little cronies," says Hines pointing at a table of youths. "They'll start talking about how they're forming a gang and what they want to call their gang. He wants the sweet roll that Mrs Palmer gave me – and there are a

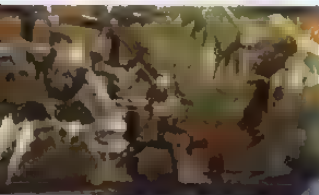
Hines instead opts to spit on the sweet roll and offer it to Butch. "I don't want your nerd rooties," replies Butch. "You're going to be sorry you did that." The choice here, says Hines, then affects how other characters view you. "If I had egged Butch into a fight, then [the girl you met earlier] will be like 'I can't believe Butch tried to fight you on your birthday – what a jerk.' And then you get more dialogue options. 'Can't you get your dad to get him to leave me alone?' or 'Don't worry, I would have kicked his ass.'

As for the quality of the dialogue, devery Hines emphasised that all the voice-acting, apart from Liam Neeson's turn as your father, was temporary – a point well illustrated by the distinctly guff tones of your mother. But if there was any area in which Bethesda risks falling down, it is this. *The Elder Scrolls IV: Oblivion* wasn't a sterling demonstration of voice direction, failing to squeeze anything other than wood from Patrick Stewart or Sean Bean. Liam Neeson's efforts here also fell a little flat. However, why or smart a script Bethesda produces, it could be jeopardised if the voice-acting doesn't match its written standard.

This demonstration also introduced us to the way AI companions will work in the game. Hines says the exact total you will be able to have is undecided, but it will likely be either two or three. One of these will be a dog called Dogmeat (a name familiar to players of previous *Fallout* games) which you rescue during a random encounter early in the game. The commands are fairly basic (attack, stay here, or stay back at the Vault (a reasonably safe location – the dog can be killed while running errands). You can also get Dogmeat to search the surrounding area for items



FORMAT 360
P.L.B. SHER MICROSOFT
DEVELOPER IN-HOUSE (TEAM NINJA)
OR G.N. JAPAN
RELEASE JUNE
PREVIOUSLY IN E182



Falcon on the wing

So far the trusty dragon sword and the lunar staff have made a return (the latter causing significantly more damage than in previous *Ninja Gaiden*s, sending chunks of flesh flying), but the real treat comes in the form of the Falcon's Claws. These bladed gauntlets strap on to Ryu's hands and feet and inspire an extremely powerful, though slightly less manoeuvrable, style of fighting: you can't use the flying swallow to dash away from large groups, but a flying kick followed by the usual sidestep will put the falcon in among the pigeons. Once there, a steady nerve and some well-timed counters will see the enemies' limbs flying like there's no tomorrow.

Ninja Gaiden II

Team Ninja returns to the fray with what looks like a flawed jewel. Could it have been any other way?

How do you make what is possibly the greatest 3D fighting game engine ever seen, and then get the camera utterly, utterly, wrong? Ask Team Ninja. In *Ninja Gaiden II* it has produced a masterpiece of flowing and vicious combat that is – though not ruined – severely hampered by the most basic of design flaws.

In the down ways, both of those aspects are incredible. Levels move from big fight to big fight, each one held in differently proportioned locations and with a subtle

almost certainly see you losing a great deal of health, if not collapsing in a bloody heap

Just as well that Ryu's been in training. He's much more effective than his previous incarnations, possessed of a dizzying range of stylish, efficient and very fast offensive capabilities that allow him to negotiate small spaces quickly. This stops foes getting an easy bead as well as allowing you to position forward strikes into the groups you'll be facing. There has never been anything quite like it in the genre. You can obliterate huge

Getting surrounded by more than two or three (which happens easily) will almost certainly see you losing a great deal of health, if not collapsing in a bloody heap

different blend of enemies. Every one its own challenge, every one a little design lesson of its own. Enemies have more guard bypasses than the original (some of which are so brutal they'll remove more than half of your health), move around you more intelligently and attack without mercy. If you get caught out and don't respond quickly, Ryu will be dispatched within a few seconds in a swift combination of attacks from multiple foes. Getting surrounded by more than two or three (which happens easily with the sheer force of numbers *NGII* throws at you) will

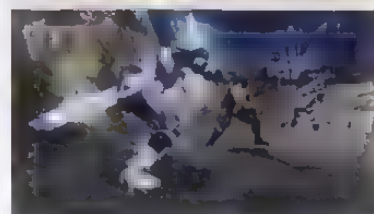
numbers of enemies in a most no time at all, cut through defences with ease – and you will look magnificent while you're doing it. The hybrid aesthetic – high-tech Technicolor Japan mixed with muted feudalist Japan – might sound dissonant but looks sharply coherent. In fact, in the hands of a skilled player *NGII* looks nothing less than exhilarating and occasionally surpasses any martial arts movie you might care to name.

And this is why the camera is such a surprisingly big issue. This isn't a problem with it getting caught on a corner

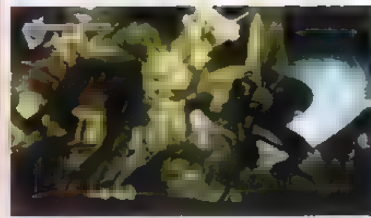


If the ninja dogs (which arrive complete with katana in mouth) don't get you, then the Egyptian cats with acid for blood or the floating purple spear scorpion will. For these, we must give thanks to Team Ninja.

occasionally, nor the odd confusing switch of perspective. It is a constant problem obscuring foes, breaking up combos, losing track of Ryu, and flicking back and forth between positions. In part it's the fault of the cramped and narrow environments that make up a significant portion of the game. In part it's a problem with opponents that move so quickly and attack from any angle so they can only be tracked manually. But overall it's thoroughly disappointing: the very second battle of the game takes place on a narrow descending ramp, and in the course of this



The official screenshots seen here aren't very representative of what you see playing the game – you're usually either seeing Ryu's back or you're cursing the camera. Unfortunately, we're not allowed to take our own screenshots of the game.



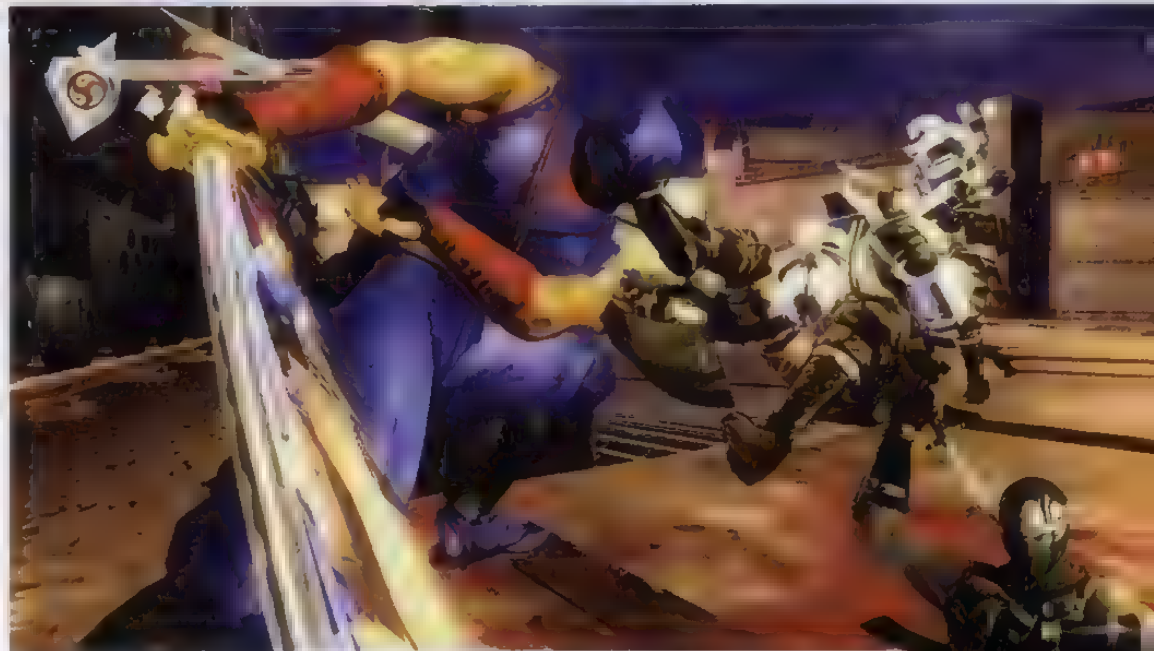
We can't even chop vegetables all that quickly, but Ryu makes a decent showing in his literal spin-off of Hell's Kitchen. The variety of demons on show is huge, but they all have heads. Just remember to clean up after yourself



fight the camera will do everything but show you the fight as it needs to be seen – getting stuck losing sight of Ryu in the midst of the group, and occasionally flipping views back and forth in the space of a few seconds.

It's not the only issue with *NGII*, but it's really the only important one. Other irritants largely come down to personal preference: the increasing dependence on demons and other magical foes in short distance attacks; as the stages wear on, the rather anodyne puzzles; the usual ineffectiveness of your shuriken. In comparison to the deadly and graceful human opponents, the lumbering purple and blue demons that turn up seem a little like low-quality *Shrek* rejects. Added to that, the bosses for the first three stages present no challenge on the highest difficulty setting available on the preview code, each one falling relatively easily – compensated for in one case by its spectacle and, for once, a camera that fixes on a practical and panoramic view of the fight. Then, weirdly, there are some illusion-shattering advertising hoardings plastered throughout the locations (it's certainly *interesting* to see Xbox 360 advertised in an Xbox 360-exclusive game).

These are all worth mentioning, but they don't significantly affect the joy of the combat. Its death is increased by the much-talked-about gore – chopping off a limb opens up an instant kill, usually a decapitation. Easy to achieve one-on-one, of course, but much more difficult in a crowded area: you'll frequently end up with injured enemies in among a group – a dangerous situation, because certain disabilities provoke a very damaging suicide attack. Button-mashing never got you anywhere in *Ninja Gaiden* anyway, but the necessity for a moment of calm timing in the midst of battles



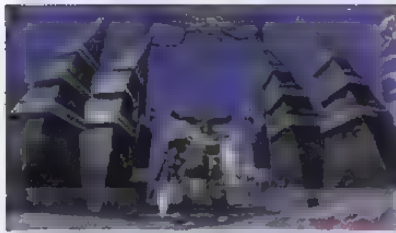
All weapons are upgradeable with orbs. Fortunately, there hasn't been one yet like the first game's nunchuks – pretty to look at and fun on occasion, but ultimately not that useful.

completely rules it out, since the instant kills can't be triggered by hammering.

It's worth reiterating that, even at preview stage, the action at the core of *Ninja Gaiden* stands up to the best in the genre. So if there's any serious development left to go on the project, we have to pray that it's directed towards the camera, because it's currently holding back such immense potential. If not, then *Ninja Gaiden II* will remain a trait for the dedicated player – and not in the way that Team Ninja wants it to be.



There are different finishing moves for each enemy, which also change depending on your relative positions. Although there are no QTEs, there is still a noticeable lull as you finish someone off – no one dares attack you



If you invade the enemy capital you'll have the ability to do some real damage, ruin the grand nature and gravitas of the place, and burn the inhabitants' building to the ground



Warhammer Online: Age Of Reckoning

EA Mythic faces a hefty challenge: survive in the fantasy MMOG market. It's carefully taking its time, but will it do enough to stand out?

FORMAT PC
PUBLISHER EA/GOA
DEVELOPER MYTHIC
ORIGIN US
RELEASE AUTUMN



A competitive market with one dominating leader is hard to crack, and if you're not that market leader it can be hard to hang on to your player-base. Which is why Mythic's long-coming *WAR* competitor has been delayed once more. Now due this autumn, the temptation to get something out and patch the bugs is usually thwarted by transient players that will move on before you've made good. It takes more than a half-baked release to survive. Clearly, this is tentative ground.

Everything in *WAR* is built around the notion of nationalism. You are to be race proud, and realm proud, taught how much you loathe your enemy from the off

Warhammer is an enormous licence, and proves itself regularly in the strategy market. But it also has a lot in common with Blizzard's behemoth: Orcs, dwarves, dragons and wizards – we know it very well. But so familiarly, breed contempt for an enormous pre-cooked audience. Clearly the desire is to be just similar enough so everyone's comfortable before it begins to subvert you. With what Mythic calls Realm vs Realm. Born of its previous sleeper hit MMOG *Dark Age Of Camelot*, RvR creates a

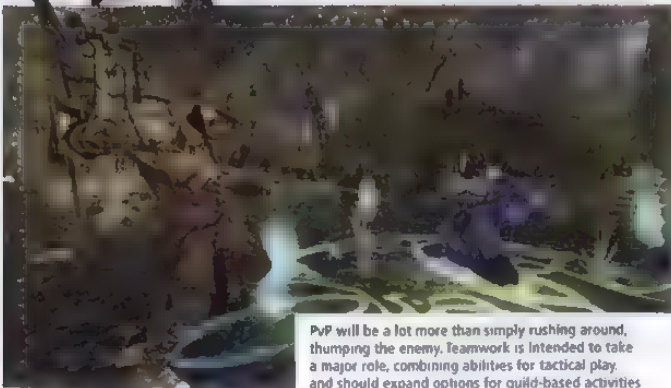


It's a little disappointing that the infinite variety of mutations and appearances offered by the forces of chaos boil down to two things: eyeballs and horns

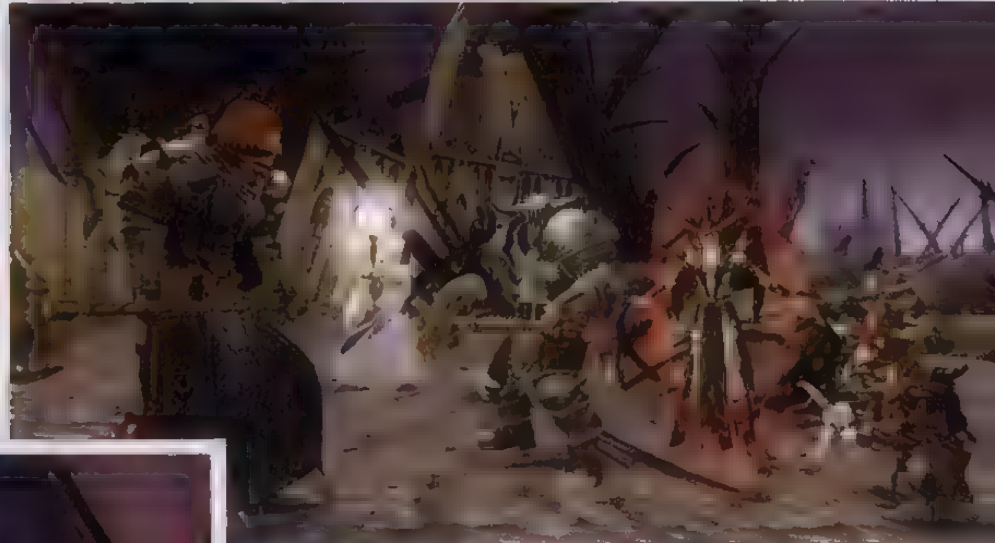
completely different approach to the MMOG war, pitching the two Warhammer sides (Order and Destruction) broken up into Imperials, high elves and Dwarves against the followers of Chaos (dark elves and greenskins) against one another in a server wide battle for control of opposing capital cities. This forms the end-game, where level 40 players will be competing through PvP to gain territory, and eventually storm the enemy capital, where they'll be able to revel in destruction, burning down buildings, smashing player buildings, statues and laying waste to all the cool features a well-funded city will have gained. Of course players will have access to the essentials, but a

besieged capital will lose more than décor: special quests, areas and businesses will need to be re-earned by the players. People are going to want to defend their capitals.

But RvR extends far beyond this. In fact, it's present from the very beginning. Everything in *WAR* is built around the notion of nationalism. You are to be race proud and realm proud, taught how much you loathe your enemy from the off. And this takes various forms. Beyond the quests you'd expect – kill them, collect that, talk to him – there's more going on, all of which gains Victory Points, which count toward your race's potential. For instance, there are the scenarios. *WOW* has implemented a similar idea recently, but this one really belongs to *WAR*. These are instanced minigames, themed around games more traditionally found in the online FPS: capture the flag, capture the base, etc. They're themed to the area they're in, and



PvP will be a lot more than simply rushing around, thumping the enemy. Teamwork is intended to take a major role, combining abilities for tactical play, and should expand options for guild-based activities



The Order are influenced by the Empire's nationalistic pride and the xenophobic paranoia that inevitably accompanies it. It tones their cities, and their behaviours, in contrast to the anarchic irreverence of Chaos



High elves are the Barbies of the fantasy world. But this is Warhammer, so there is only war, and as such the Mattel themed bunch are still very much about the violence. Dark elves look so much more the part, though

are closely plotted to match the ongoing story, rather than WOW's more disparate inclusion. More familiar PvP in the form of skirmishes also adds points to the push. And then another idea lifted from Camelot comes in the form of the battle for Keeps. This is a guild based game in which you battle for control of strategically key castles demonstrating ownership with your guild's banner. Once captured, the enemy guild gets not only your tower, but also your banner to defend.

Even the PvE will help. And it's here that WAR demonstrates its most brilliant inclusion: the public quest. As you'll see in our interview on page 18, it's the idea that every other MMO will steal from now on. These are quests that you stumble upon and join in with. There's no teaming up, no clicking to accept – you just see something's happening and muddle in. These PQs tend to be around three stages, ending in a main

event such as a giant boss stomping out, with all in the area pitching in to bring him down. The game then rewards you, for your contribution to the effort, rolling against others for the best loot. We've played these and can report that they work extremely well. There will be fuss made.

WAR's other key inclusion is the Tome of Knowledge. This is a virtual book that takes the role of many regular MMOG features, as well as helping the game construct a coherent narrative. In there will be your quest log, player stats, and so on, but also an enormous amount of information. There's a bestiary, including how many you've killed of anything, background details about the chapter you're in, extended information on quests, details of where PQs can be found, available scenarios, and a whole other meta game in the form of Tome Unlocks. 12,000 of them. These can be anything from stumbling upon a secret area and finding a

new quest, unlocking, to dying for the 1,000th time and having the Tome mock you accordingly. This could give you a new title, loot, or simply some bonus comedy reading.

Comedy is so hugely important here. The Warhammer world could have a propensity for being po-faced, but Mythic's embracing the lunacy of its world. Playing as Chaos, you'll have the potential to grow obscure horns out of the side of your head. An orc can fire himself at a besieged enemy using an orc-pult. Or perhaps you'll get deliberately eaten by a giant squid, then enrage him by pulling on his tentacles until he attacks the enemy. The silliness is also a neat solution for perennial MMO problems. With such a focus on PvP, what happens if some high-level idiot tries to ruin the fun for the lower levels? He gets transformed into a chicken. A very easy to kill chicken. Of course, you'll want to check this out at some point in order to get the Tome Unlocked, and then to see if you can fight any other chickens. Another Tome unlock, there too.

In order for this to work, Mythic has to find a way to sell RvR to the masses to differentiate WAR from WOW without confusing them. After all, it realises some of the vast potential that the MMOG has so far been failed to achieve. The solution is the iterative process, going through the game over and over again, tweaking, and dying. It would be an injustice if this were dismissed as a WOW clone, as it's anything but.



Another level

WAR originally kicked off with the idea of having no levelling at all, but rather letting you micro-manage your character's stats. Abandoned, this has been replaced by a lot of different ways you can tweak your abilities within those levels. These are Fight To Fight choices – abilities you can change about your set-up before a team-based PvP battle, where skills can be combined with teammates' abilities, Gameplay Session Choices – at least 20 Tactics that you can swap in and out to spec yourself appropriately for what sort of game you plan to play, Lifetime Choices – your permanent career path; Bane Tactics, based on how you approach PvE; and finally Renown Rewards, based on your play in the RvR game improving your PvP abilities.

FORMAT: 360, PS3
PUBLISHER: THQ
DEVELOPER: VIGIL GAMES
COUNTRY: US
RETAILER: \$69.99



War has quite the selection of weapons available to him, apart from the huge sword he begins with. In the early hub section the weaker humanoid enemies were easily dispatched with a meaty chaingun, which was also pressed into service against the sandworm. Vigil needs reprimanding for using the rather naff term 'weaponise' when demonstrating War's ability to grab and use a great number of things in the environment to batter foes: lampposts, newsstands and cars were all used for bludgeoning purposes. At one point, a huge demon threw a car at War, who plucked it from its arc and smashed it right back before viciously chopping both the creature's hands off and plunging a sword into its head. He's obviously a bit old testament at heart.

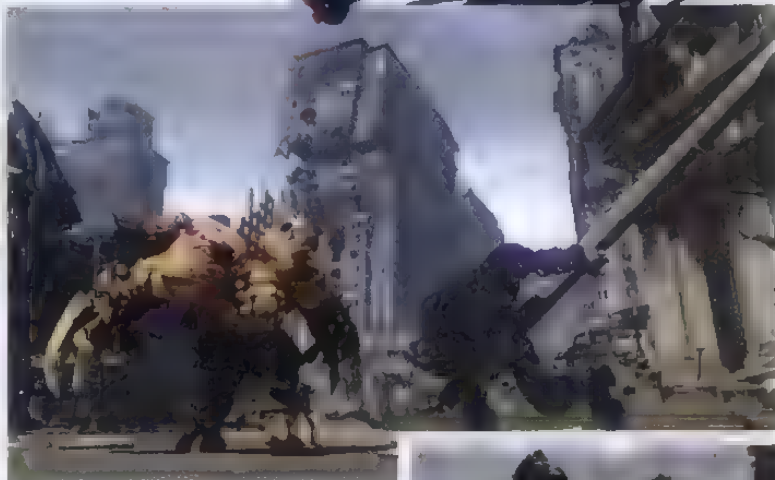
Darksiders: Wrath Of War

A new entry in the legendary pantheon of 'games that look great but have rubbish names'



If you were looking around for a videogame plot, there are worse places to settle than Revelations. Power was given to him that sat thereon to take peace from the Earth, and that they should kill one another, and there was given unto him a great sword. That pretty much has every base covered for a third-person hack 'n' slash, and it's the starting point for Vigil's *Darksiders: Wrath Of War*, set in the aftermath of the apocalypse and casting you, as one of the four horsemen (albeit one who lost all of his powers after taking a beating at the hands of the demon Abaddon).

The game's central hub is a smashed city fresh from the hellfire and brimstone, and full of zombie-like humanoids. There are fire holes in buildings, cracks hundreds of feet wide, and the debris of a hundred explosions litter every road. Within this environment the scope is relatively free-roaming; most structures can be investigated



Yes, he is about to clock that beast with a lamppost. Many things can be picked up or ripped out to add a little extra oomph to your attacks – and bring about certain finishers.

internally as well as admired from afar, but access to the 'dungeons' is limited by War's abilities.

There's an RPG-like progression to these, and here we find the real inspiration behind *Darksiders*: Nintendo. Both the *Metroid* and *Zelda* games inspire the game's hub structure – new abilities open new areas, and allow exploration of previously limited areas. This in turn allows access to the game's 'dungeons', more linear areas with the usual assortment of puzzles and environmental challenges, where War picks up new tools. These tools: a grappling hook, a portal device, then prove the keys to the area's puzzles and ultimately its boss. There are some spectacular background effects, though in the dungeon shown, a routine trek was interrupted by a huge demon smashing through the roof while fighting a much smaller angel. Tearing chunks out of each other in the background as well as the scenery, the battle ended when the angel fell out of the crack and the demon gave chase. This is part of an ongoing battle between angels and demons, of which War is on the outskirts. (Angels, incidentally, happily wear armour and use firearms, so they're no soft touch.)

Other tools to get excited about include War's horse, *Ruin*. There's a stretch of desert that can't initially be accessed, thanks to the presence of a sandworm straight out of *Dune*. Once *Ruin* is acquired, you can move more quickly and merrily pick it off with a chaingun, before moving on for the kill.



The zombie-like monsters seem to be the most common foe browsing around, and look like fun target practice, but it's the massive demons that will actually hit you back on occasion – this example is surprisingly quick.

cinematic cut in which War slices a cross into the creature's soft underbelly before landing back on *Ruin* and cantering away. On the same plains were some demonic bull-like creatures that could be mounted and used against each other – Vigil wants to offer a way for War to use almost every enemy as a weapon.

There are some strong inspirations behind *Darksiders*, and the sections of the game shown thus far look promising. Whether it can maintain the variety of a *Zelda* across such a structure, and with such themes in its background, remains to be seen – but the world's coherent look and its scripted moments both have the kind of assured touch that, from an as-yet-unproven studio, can only bode well.



Darksiders uses the *Jericho* innovation of having dead enemies explode into clouds of flies that disperse – one of that game's better features, but let's hope it's the only similarity. The aquamarine orbs are nothing less than the souls of your victims – a currency you can trade for powers.



Red Faction Guerrilla

Volition shows that if you just want to destroy things, you've got to build a whole lot first

FORMAT 360, PC, PS3
PUBLISHER THQ
DEVELOPER VOLITION
ORIGIN US
RELEASE 2009



Each piece of debris or shrapnel created by blasts has its own mass and momentum, which works both for and against you. It also means that cover becomes useless under sustained fire.

A quick *Red Faction* primer: the first two games were passable first-person shooters set in different locations, the selling point being destructibility, the original less linear than the sequel. Now here's *Red Faction Guerrilla*, an open-world orgy of destruction, moving the series from its first-person roots into the third-person open-world genre.

You play as a member of a resistance movement working against the Earth Defense Force (no word on the incorporation or otherwise of giant ants) on Mars. Hence the guerrilla aspect of the game: your missions typically involve messing around with the EDF's plans, sabotaging structures and generally making a nuisance of yourself. In the location we've seen the focus was on smaller side-missions that cropped up on the fly and were ongoing – if you hear a message and ignore it, for example, the event will play out without your involvement. All well and good, but the reason that *Guerrilla* turns heads is something more obvious.

The appeal is in Volition's replacement of the Geo-Mod technology, responsible for the



The world is claimed to be four times larger than that of *Saints Row 2*, with all missions serving the wholly admirable purpose of gradually lowering morale across EDF's employees.

crumbly destruction in the previous titles, with a Havok-based physics engine that has been heavily adapted. In practice, it can be marvelous to watch buildings don't simply collapse after taking X amount of hits with a cannon; they have foundations and different strengths in different sections of their structure, and have to be taken down piece by piece. Volition is keen to point out that each building has to be built in a manner analogous to a real-world structure: otherwise they simply won't stand up.

This sort of claim has been made before, of course, but to be fair to Volition the short area of *Guerrilla* on show at a recent demo event went a long way towards backing it up. Buildings would sometimes take incredible amounts of punishment and retain their structural integrity, simply because the aggressor was aiming at the wrong walls. At other times, a few charges on the key supports of a structure followed by a button press did the job in a matter of seconds.

The applications extend beyond the buildings to other aspects of the world: the cars, in particular, react convincingly when shunting each other, pieces of bodywork becoming loose and eventually falling away completely as two vehicles tangle side on. It was notable that their drivers seemed relatively unperturbed by the fact that they'd just been battered off the road, and would simply attempt to drive on as normal. Perhaps advanced AI to stand alongside the remarkable physics is asking too much.

Beyond this, there's a concern that Volition's open-world engine as a whole may not be up to the standard of some of the Havok-driven innovations. Even at this stage, however, the technology holds up more capably than it does in Volition's other title *Saints Row 2*, and hopes have to be high that a rewarding structure can be built around what's an interesting premise.



The playable preview of *Red Faction Guerrilla* was limited to one location and a few vehicles. One presence that was particularly notable, however, was a walker-mech reminiscent of that from *Aliens*. Controlling the left and right arms with the respective triggers, the power of the huge machine was obvious, particularly when it was being used to make a sizeable mess of a nearby building, and then trundled straight through a brick wall. Then there was the simple pleasure of tossing vehicles around like they were made of balsa wood. Let's hope there are a few other 'vehicles' that go beyond the usual trucks and jeeps in this manner.



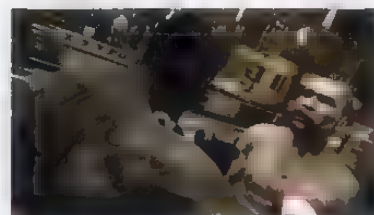
Crashing into things damages both your vehicle and the structure, whether building or outpost – which means that careless driving really does cost your life. But it's worth sacrificing a bit of the bodywork for a grand entrance, no?



FORMAT 360, DS, Wii
 PUBLISHER 2K GAMES
 DEVELOPER VENOM GAMES
 ORIGIN UK
 RELEASE SUMMER

Don King Presents: Prizefighter

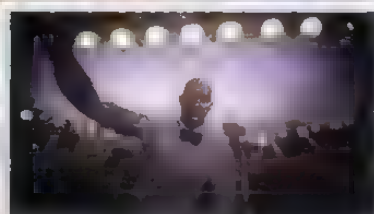
A new contender enters the ring. Will Don King's hot air be enough to win the fight?



Character customisation includes a raft of tattoo options to decorate your slabs of muscle. The tool appears a little smoother to use than *Oblivion's*, but it includes all the usual sliders, from nasal bridge width to chin height



Heavy punches are marked with a slowed cutaway of the blow that isn't quite as lovingly detailed as *FN3's* but apparently avoids some of its repetitiveness. Knockdowns are accompanied by faded vision and tinnitus



Your coach will tell you that you must fight like a specific boxer in a match from the past, and the game will take you to that fight, with accompanying visual effects that are appropriate to the age to experience the style for yourself



Ring side story

Prizefighter's career mode is told through a 48-minute live-filmed "documentary" that tells the story of the player character through interviews with Don King, in-game coaches and various real-world and fictional characters. Their performances and the script manage an appropriate balance of videogame drama with realism, with, for instance, veteran heavyweight Ken Norton tending to slur his lines as the result of a recent car crash, a detail Seymour didn't want to hide because it would lend authentic weight to his appearances.

Apart from motivating players to work through the mode, the story also sets up various interesting scenarios for fights, including biased judges (don't let the match go to points) and a broken hand (leave the left slug for the final punch).

While 2K is holding Don King as the name that will carry *Prizefighter*, the name that overshadows it is *Fight Night Round 3*. For many, EA's sweat-soaked up-close-and-beautiful ode to the cinematic ideal of boxing profoundly reinvigorated the genre, and it remains a visual benchmark that, right now, *Prizefighter* falls some way short of matching.

But for executive producer **Matthew Seymour**, who with *Top Spin* created a serious match for the likes of *Virtua Tennis*, and steered *Amped 3* from its predecessors' dry precision to being deliriously playful, *FN3* may have been beautiful, but it was also shallow. "It's bullish that it redefined fighting, and it's time to move on," he says, criticising its failure to utilise 3D space, its "terrible" career mode and its unrealistically slow analogue movement.

Seymour is proud, then, that *Prizefighter's* controls are digital and are rooted in the likes of *Street Fighter II*. Coded by Venom Games, the developer behind the much-admired *Rocky* series, *Prizefighter* plays fast, boxers moving nimbly around the ring, even if their

animation currently lacks the smoothness that slower games possess. The system is focused on movement – with step-around dodges and punches, and performance is tied to three meters – standard health, stamina, and the more novel adrenaline. Adrenaline is granted through fervent support from the crowd – fill it up and powerful signature moves become available.

Crowd manipulation is actually a significant part of *Prizefighter*, with a career mode that follows the player character's rise from mean streets to glory, told through a fictional filmed documentary (see 'Ring side story'). Playing to the media must be balanced with training – time spent gaining fans (apparently including making barbecue sauce commercials or attending R&B concerts) will see the adrenaline bar filled further at the start of matches and larger pay packets, but it's time that's not spent improving punches and movement.

Training itself is a series of rhythm-based challenges that feature the return on one leaderboards – a skipping challenge sees *Guitar Hero*-like button prompts scro toward a line on which the boxer stands,

while the Wii version will include some games that support the Balance Board. An auto-train feature, meanwhile, will see fighters awarded 70 per cent of what they might playing manually.

The character-creation tool is full-featured and appears easy to use, the body editor segueing with mesmerising smoothness from a scrawny-chested wimp to a flabby-breasted porker. But the game currently only seems to feature one, albeit variable, model for all fighters, and though they sport detailed skin textures when close up, from hair, blemishes and shining trickles of sweat, they look rather bland from a distance. The game will also feature ten 'legends' – retired fighters including Nigel Benn, Muhammad Ali and Chris Eubank – and 30 contemporary boxers, and they'll fight in 22 venues with a referee in the ring who Seymour promises will not get in the way of the action.

With a career mode that tells a regular boxing story in a new way and a refusal to blindly follow a pack that has been wowed by *FN3*, *Prizefighter* is cutting a distinctive path. With a bit more visual polish, it could be a successful jab at the genre.



The game will include videos of fights and interviews from Don King's archives. King himself will also pop up berating or congratulating you on your performance



Soul Calibur IV

Business as usual, then: big people, big weapons, big fights

It's destined to be overshadowed by another fighter that shares its numerals, but *Soul Calibur* has never been bothered about fighting on the undercard. It has always played more of a supporting role in the genre, a genuine alternative to the bundles of clone kung fu warriors, and the first of the current generation is arriving with the same attitude – maintaining what makes the series distinct while improving on what it can.

The most obvious manifestation of this philosophy lies in its visuals. It is simply beautiful, invoking some of the shivers that the original once provoked. The character models have been overhauled, and are huge, chunky and full of colour, while backgrounds are highly detailed without being distracting, and it's all rendered at a flawless 60fps. Old hands like Mitsurugi look familiar, but feature the little imperfections – scars, frayed edges – that new console technology allows. There is still a little chunkiness about the animation with certain placeholder frames evident and the occasional weapon clipping through other characters mid-move, but these are temporary concerns.

The roster will be familiar to any fan of

The levels we played varied in size significantly, to the extent that ring-outs moved between 'frequent' and 'never' among the arenas.



Haven't we seen him somewhere before? R'll take significant skill to make Yoda a valuable addition to the roster, rather than a Gon-like novelty.

the series. Cassandra, Maxi, Mitsurugi Siegfried, Sophitia, Taki, Tira and Voldo a return with tweaked movesets, with some new throws and combinations on freshening-up duties. Newcomer Hildegard von Krome on the other hand, looks to bring something unusual: sluggish but deceptively powerful. She's capable of stringing together combos thanks to switching between two weapons: a long spear and short sword.

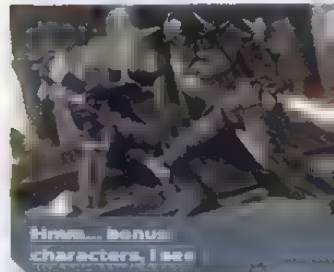
Pressurising space is not a new element to the *Soul Calibur* series, but the features of *IV* seem designed specifically to accentuate this aspect. Habitual blockers are confronted with the addition of breakable armour – a *Soul Gauge* decreases when blocking,

increases when attacking, and when emptied a piece of kit can be removed with another hit. It's not as common as you might expect, primarily because it takes a decent amount of thwacking to wear down your opponent's meter, but also because it doesn't affect the damage they receive. Instead, it opens your 'eye up to the new Critical Finishes essentially a more deadly version of the original's Critical Edge attack. It doesn't feel like an essential addition, more of a visually arresting punctuation mark to an attentional hammering, but thanks to the circumstances required (as well as the tight timing) it doesn't seem to play too overbearing a role.

There are one or two black marks, not least Namco's apparent desire to take on Tecmo in a Most Ridiculous Breasts competition. It's a little disconcerting that an otherwise high-quality production still feels the need to indulge in this kind of thing, but to be fair to Namco, which hasn't had a seriously sized hit in a while, its hoary convention should at least ensure it grabs attention on demo pods at retail.

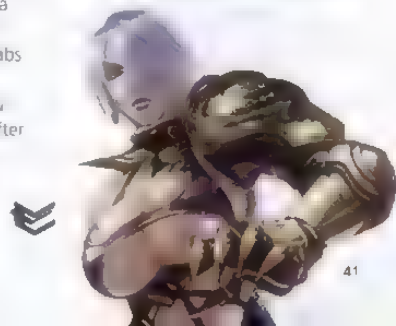
Quite apart from this, however, *Soul Calibur IV* looks like a return to form after the underachieving third instalment, retaining the frantic and powerful feel of armed combat and adding an appropriate level of fine visual polish.

FORMAT 360 ARCADE, PS3
PUBLISHER BANDAI NAMCO/BANDAI
DEVELOPER PROJECT SOUL
ORIGIN JAPAN
RELEASE JULY



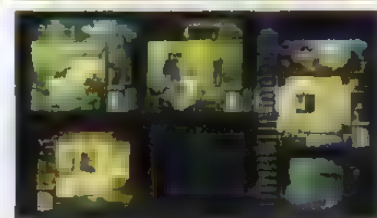
Hmm... bonus characters, I see.

The announcement that Darth Vader and Yoda would be appearing in the game, respectively on PS3 and 360, has garnered some notice, but cameos are hardly new to the series. Dreamcast *Soul Calibur* saw the appearance of Yoshimitsu, and by the time of *Soul Calibur II* Namco was experimenting with the possibilities of multiples. PS2 had Heihachi, Xbox had Spawn, and, best of all and an excellent fit for the series, GameCube had Link. There's not really much comparison, though the choice between the charmless Spawn or Yoda isn't a tricky one to make.





Although the time-bending is largely consistent, you do occasionally have difficulty knowing which mad rules the game is playing by, and some puzzles have solutions that are intellectually satisfying but pedantic in execution.



Artist David Hellman's previous work was on the now-defunct experimental webcomic *A Lesson Is Learned But The Damage Is Irreversible*. Static images of *Braid* cannot hope to convey the impact of its visual style.

Braid

It's astounding. Time is fleeting. Madness takes its toll.

Jonathan Blow is something of a figurehead for indie development, speaking passionately about how games must speak to the human condition if they are to be considered a worthy artform. As the release of his time-bending puzzle-platformer *Braid* draws closer, we're able to see if Blow's hot air has condensed into something resembling the inspirational levels to which he believes games can climb.

Braid is certainly a work of considerable aesthetic success – the praise for which largely goes to artist David Hellman, whose visual endeavours subvert the stereotype of the old 2D platformer. Instead, layered brushwork forms a lush, moving painting, a progression of Miyamoto's intentions with the crayon rendering used in *Yoshi's Island*. Indeed, *Braid* makes many (slightly wearing) references to that era of gaming, and that particular series – navigation in this world is very much like in a Mario game, and there are castles and toothsome plants as well as a missing

princess. What it manages to say is that even a game that's willfully circumscribed by the conventions of one of the oldest genres need not be simple. It's a good reflection of Blow's views on the habitual underestimation of the medium, and to some degree it carries over to the fundamentals of play, in as much as the platforming is complicated by a number of time-bending devices.

Braid allows you to reverse time but, unlike in *Prince Of Persia: The Sands Of Time*, this power is not limited. That you can rewind to the first step you make removes the tension from dying – and so Blow has rethought platformer conventions, shifting the challenge to another area and using your precognition of events to solve environmental puzzles. Each zone presents a new trick in addition to the time-reversal mechanic, many of which defy causality in brilliant and migraine-inducing ways (see 'It's time o'clock'). Getting from the beginning to the end of a level is usually of no great difficulty – but you must collect jigsaw pieces

along the way, eventually piecing them together in a separate minigame in order to unlock the sixth and final zone. The images that result from the jigsaws are graphic extensions of a somewhat overwrought story about love, longing and second chances – for which *Braid*'s time-reversal gameplay acts as a fanciful and tenuous metaphor. The impressionistic narrative is touching, but the sophomoric manner in which it is written makes you glad it's relegated to a largely optional chin-stroking meta-text.

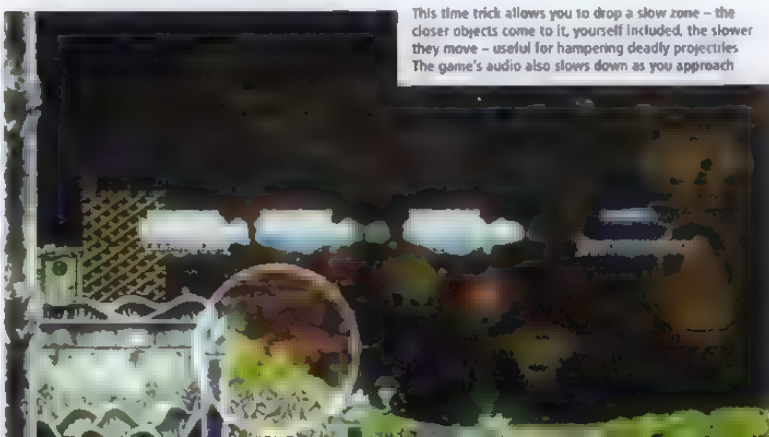
Even though *Braid* doesn't communicate itself well verbally, it does a better job through pervading emotions, shaped by the yearning, beautiful score and the painting of each level. The game's fundamental and delightfully taxing action is also strong enough to stand without these forced metaphors, even if it does not yet amount to the kind of transcendent artistic experience that Blow hopes to elicit from the act of interaction alone. That process could well be in another cast.



FORMAT 360, PC
PUBLISHER MICROSOFT (360),
NUMBER NINE INC (PC)
DEVELOPER NUMBER NINE INC
ORIGIN US
RELEASE TBC

It's time o'clock!

Although *Braid*'s mechanics happily create temporal paradoxes, they are internally consistent in the way they act, and usually explained by context. Glowing green elements are exempt from rewinds. Open a glowing green door with an ordinary key, which then breaks, and you can reverse time to unbreak the key – but the door will remain open. A later trick creates a doppelgänger after each reversal which performs your actions from before time was reversed, allowing you to be in two places at once. The most purely conceived, however, is the zone in which every step you take towards the right advances time for your environment, and every step left reverses it.

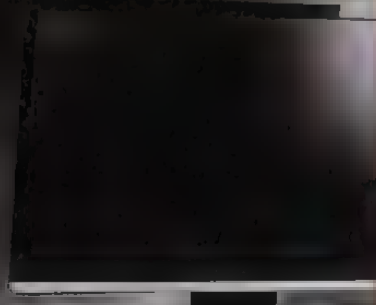


This time trick allows you to drop a slow zone – the closer objects come to it, yourself included, the slower they move – useful for hampering deadly projectiles. The game's audio also slows down as you approach.

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FORMAT DS
PUBLISHER SEGA
DEVELOPER BIOWARE
ORIGIN US
RELEASE SEPTEMBER

Sonic Chronicles: The Dark Brotherhood

BioWare tries another spin on Sega's most bankable character

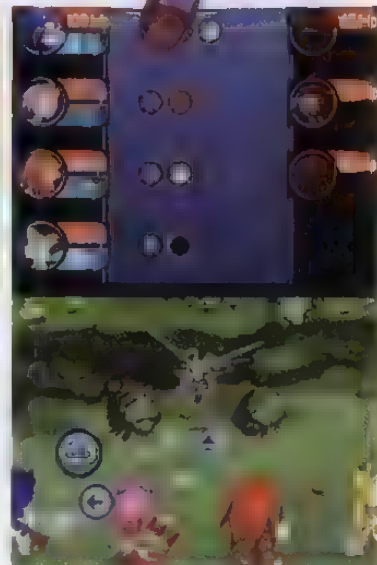
For anyone who collects Sonic merchandise, watches the cartoon joyfully buys each new game on release and keeps a pedant's eye on the official canon, *Sonic Chronicles* will be like Christmas come early. Almost all of the characters that have cropped up in the various titles, from Amy Rose to Vector the crocodile, will be making an appearance, and BioWare has stated its commitment to tying up loose narrative ends in the franchise.

There's only one problem: the Sonic canon is a bit rubbish. Characters like Shadow and Silver are copies devoid of the charisma of their original and in an RPG especially one with mechanics like turn-based battling, narrative and the world around which you're moving are crucial factors. *Sonic Chronicles'* combat is serviceable enough, and livened up somewhat by touchscreen fiddling à la *Quendian* for special moves, although they don't feel quite as tight as those in, say, the GBA's *Mario & Luigi Superstar Saga* (an inspiration here in both design and tone).

There are some BioWare touches here



Sonic's replies in conversation can be nuanced to try to get more information from other characters, and leveling points are set by the player (there are also auto-assign options). It's also worth mentioning that *Sonic Chronicles'* cartoony aesthetic is quite its own, and can look striking in motion. The problem is that, at the moment, it isn't very exciting. There's no real sense of fun about the game – but there's time yet, and BioWare certainly has the capabilities to surprise us all with this most unlikely pairing of character and genre.



There are 11 playable characters in total, and each has a different special move for use on the map in order to open up new areas. Is it lazy design that Tails can only fly on the map when BioWare says he can? Probably.



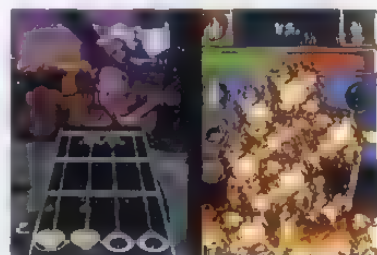
There's the odd joke in the script which raises a smile, but the first level gives no indication that the *Mario & Luigi* games have any serious competition.

Guitar Hero On Tour

Neat peripheral, but will you really want to unleash the Power of Rock on the bus?

The console version may come with a plastic peripheral – but at least it still looks like a guitar. This was never going to be feasible for a DS *Guitar Hero*, and the solution feels initially like an odd compromise. *On Tour* comes with a chunky black grip that slots into the DS's GBA slot with four buttons and a hand strap that runs around the back of the DS. He d like a book and assuming you are right-handed, you watch the coloured notes slide down the left screen while you strum with the plectrum-shaped stylus on the right, while holding down the button of the appropriate colour.

The limited button real-estate means that *On Tour* will not have the five-button expert mode familiar to the console versions, and in other ways, too, the DS game appears to have been pitched at a younger audience than that of its non-portable brethren. The racier rock anthems have been wisely removed from *On Tour* to garner it a lower age rating, its 30-odd track listing made up from more family-friendly tunes selected from the full span of *Guitar Hero* games, plus a small number of DS exclusives.



With only four 'strings', this iteration of the *Guitar Hero* experience looks and feels a little strange – and that's before you even get to the absence of a full plastic axe.

Four of the six avatars and several of the stages have been carried over from previous *Guitar Hero* games. Multiplayer also proceeds largely in the same fashion, bringing back the duel mode of *Guitar Hero 3*. Aside from a small number of other game types particular to the DS, including a signature-signing activity, there will be little else that surprises players of the console versions. But this is not to say that energetic players of *On Tour* won't surprise the beleaguered commuters around them.



FORMAT DS
PUBLISHER ACTIVISION
DEVELOPER VICARIOUS VISIONS
ORIGIN US
RELEASE JULY



The peripheral (top) is as compact as could be reasonably expected, but we can't help thinking that it has more of an accordion vibe about it than a guitar's. We look forward to the demo on stage at Donnington.

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It's worth watching the 'street tips' videos available online, if only to marvel at the work of Gary Busey in 2008 - his advice on how to wind up 'hardcore gangbangers' has a terrifyingly authentic feel about it



Saints Row 2

Gaming's most cynical franchise gets a retread with some old faults intact, and new ones just for you

FORMAT 360
PUBLISHER THQ
DEVELOPER VOLITION
ORIGIN US
RELEASE AUGUST

No other open-world game so desperately wanted to be *Grand Theft Auto* as *Saints Row*. So how do you deal with the fact that, for all its little innovations, it simply wasn't as good or taken as seriously? Easy: You pretend you always wanted to be ridiculous anyway. So it goes for *Saints Row 2*, which aims to be more ridiculous, exaggerated and overblown than its predecessor. The result is a game that looks to be, in every sense, comic.

But don't get the wrong impression: *Saints Row 2* isn't a stupid game. Quite the opposite - it's one of the most carefully calculated products that will see release this year; its world has been designed as a hood

with hos and 'cribs' waiting to be pimped because that's what the men holding the purse strings thinks a particular target demographic wants. And these origins are obvious in every aspect.

On to the new features, then. Taunts can be aimed at anyone, and range from giving the finger to various other hand gestures, pointing at your crotch, and actually teabagging other characters. Your crib can be customised by buying various accoutrements, including pool tables and, yes, a stripper on a pole, as well as various overarching themes, one of which is 'classy' (a label amusingly fails to justify in any reasonable sense).

The character customisation is extensive to say the least, and unlike the original allows female avatars - although it's difficult to see how they comfortably fit into this particularly male-skewed world. At least the customisation is significantly improved over the original, in the sense that your creations are more likely to resemble humans rather than sideshow attractions.

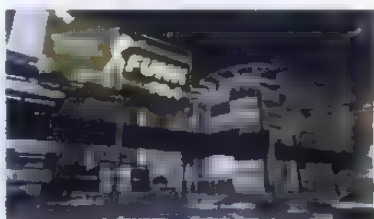
In terms of the key mechanics, combat remains free-aim, although an over-the-shoulder mode has been added for those precision moments, assuring that the plentiful enemies soon fall like skittles. Another new addition is the ability to take foes hostage, and use them as either a bullet shield or a projectile weapon (on this evidence, in another scenario your avatar could be a champion javelin thrower). Throughout, though, the game shows itself to be in a horribly buggy condition - and this with only a few months of development left in the bag. On one occasion, taking someone hostage simply results in enemies freezing in place until they're taken out with headshots. On another, a fleeing civilian somehow summons the thigh strength to jump a cliff face as high as a house in order to escape our reign of terror. On yet another, jacking a car sees our avatar throw out the occupant, a doppelgänger mysteriously remaining in the seat as we climb in. There's a tendency to wink at this kind of thing - it'll all be tidied up nicely, right? But the original *Saints Row* was notoriously buggy, which hardly fosters confidence in Volition's ability to deliver something more robust this time out.

The 3D engine, meanwhile, sometimes groans under the weight of what's going on even with cars and scenery popping into view from nowhere. *GTAIV* (see p82) may not be technically perfect, but its graphical fidelity is worlds beyond *Saints Row 2*'s.

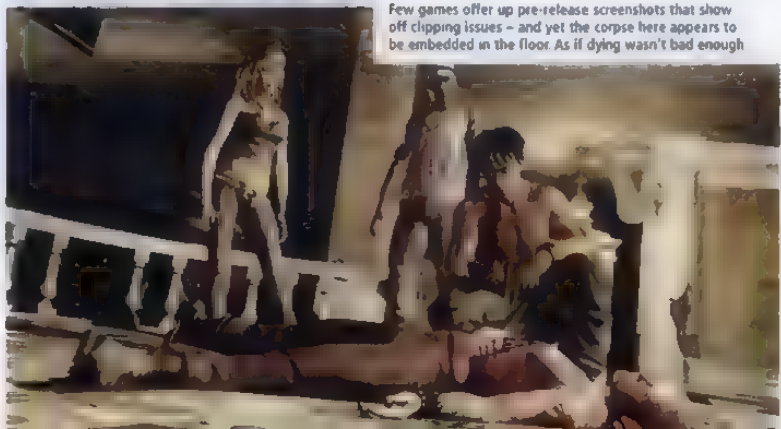
When the original game appeared, of course, there was no Xbox 360 *Grand Theft Auto*. This year, Volition's game will not have that luxury, and will have to work harder for a slice of the pie. Its enormous explosions may not be enough.



One of the better features is the option to play through the entire game in co-op and drop in or out as you please. The 'campaign' mode will remain largely the same throughout, although there will be some co-op exclusive missions, but the thought of what two throwers of satchel charges could accomplish within *Saints Row 2*'s destructible world is tempting. Other interactions are more standard, such as a mission in which one player pilots a helicopter while the other shoots at vehicles pursuing someone in need of protecting.



Few games offer up pre-release screenshots that show off clipping issues - and yet the corpse here appears to be embedded in the floor. As if dying wasn't bad enough.



Baja

A game based on the Baja 1000 race, which lasts more than a day and generally isn't very popular on television

The very thought of a game about endurance racing might bring some people out in rashes. What is this upstart entering into the world of *Burnout* and *Need For Speed*? How dare it offer races that are based on treks rather than sprints? *Baja*'s certainly daring – and if driving a buggy across desert and mud watching the cacti fly by is your idea of fun, 2XL may have something to press your buttons

Although there's a lot of brown, orange and yellow making up the terrain you'll be driving over, *Baja* is a good-looking game – not least when hooked up to three displays for the entire 'wraparound' view (requiring three networked consoles). The vehicles – of which there are eight classes, from 4x4s and buggies to bikes – knock chunks off each other in close proximity, and this damage gradually mounts and causes slowdown – which can be fixed up by calling in a helicopter for a quick repair stop

The most notable aspect of the vehicles is the handling model, specifically the suspension, which on the bumpy surfaces has a real impact on steering and can cause



The main race, which can take over 30 hours, isn't part of the package, but there's a four-hour event which doesn't have to be beaten in one sitting – and has an AI option for lav breaks

severe misjudgements from the untrained endurance driver. *Baja* contains both point-to-point and loop races and, as well as other competitors, expect to see traffic on the public roads you race on. Developer 2XL has experience in the off-road genre with the likes of *ATV Offroad Fury* and *MX Unleashed*, so *MotorStorm 2* might not have Christmas all to itself



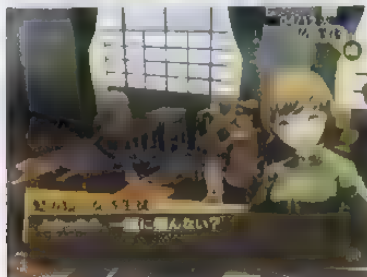
FORMAT PS3
PUBLISHER TMQ
DEVELOPER 2XL
ORIGIN US
RELEASE AUGUST



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Persona 4

Atlus' big-in-Japan high-school demon-slaying RPG graduates to another sequel

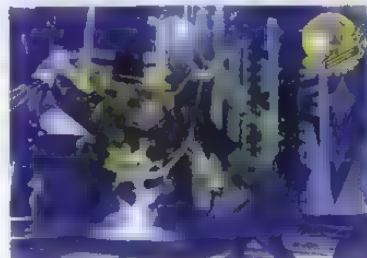


While they form a squad of supernatural heroes at night, tasked with holding back the evil Shadow legions, by day the kids attend school. As before, these sections are an oddly charming way of breaking up the dungeon crawls

It's remarkable just how resilient Japan has proved itself to the charms of the latest console tech. Presumably this is only a good thing for companies like Atlus, which might not otherwise have the resources to develop such a wide portfolio for PS3, and certainly no bad thing for games such as those of the chismatic *Persona* series, which may be little improved by added technical gloss

Persona 4 once again concerns a demon-slaying squad of schoolchildren who are able to conjure their souls into material forms, known as Personas, and it is the first in the series not to diverge entirely from the gameplay systems of its predecessors. Building on *Persona 3*, the sequel will reportedly place more emphasis on the multitude of possible endings to the story

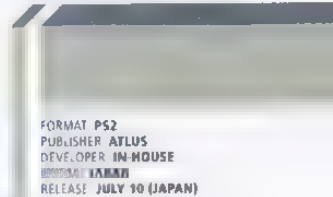
In keeping with the Japanese brand of techno-horror that sees common household electronics take on ghastly new supernatural potential (see *The Ring*), *Persona 4*'s plot revolves around an urban legend which states that looking at a switched-off



Shadows all have some weakness and finding them is the key to victory. While Personas can be used to fight for you, characters also have their own attacks, using either the available weaponry or their individual skills

television set at midnight when it rains outside will allow you to glimpse destiny

The action is divided between the real world, in which our heroes attend classes, take tests and discuss the events occurring around them, and randomly generated dungeon crawls which take place inside the alternative reality accessed via the television. Once again, enemies are Shadows, and players can either combat them through their Personas or directly. It seems reasonable to maintain continuity, but since so much of *Persona 3*'s attraction came from its distinctive character, we can only hope that *Persona 4* will introduce some novelties in its approach rather than just extending that experience



FORMAT PS2
PUBLISHER ATLUS
DEVELOPER IN-HOUSE
ORIGIN JAPAN
RELEASE JULY 10 (JAPAN)



Apparently, the weather will also play an important role, not just in fulfilling the conditions of the legend, allowing you to access the otherworld's random dungeon crawls, but throughout the school day

FORMAT 360, PS3
 PUBLISHER TBA
 DEVELOPER METROPOLIS/CD PROJEKT
 ORIGIN POLAND
 RELEASE 2009

They

It may be buried beneath the influences of other games, but there could be more to *They* than a sense of déjà vu

It's an easy one to kick – a lesser-known Eastern Bloc developer, a nuts-and-bolts shooter with a silly name, a number of elements that echo successful titles of the last few years. The crumbling, desaturated city can't help but leave you in mind of *Gears Of War*. And there is the giant, segmented tower that

stands above it – which could be generously described as a reference to *Half-Life 2*'s Citadel. You may even think you remember some of the enemies from *Final Fantasy*: The Spirits Within, or the spooky kid from *FEAR*.

Dig a little deeper, however, and you begin to suspect that there's more going on here than a cheap derivative shooter – *They* has been in development for just six months and yet the build we've seen had a degree of functionality and polish exceeding that of most games we see in the final six months of development – and there's a year and a half left before release. In fact, it has proved impressive enough that developer Metropolis was recently snapped up by CD Projekt.

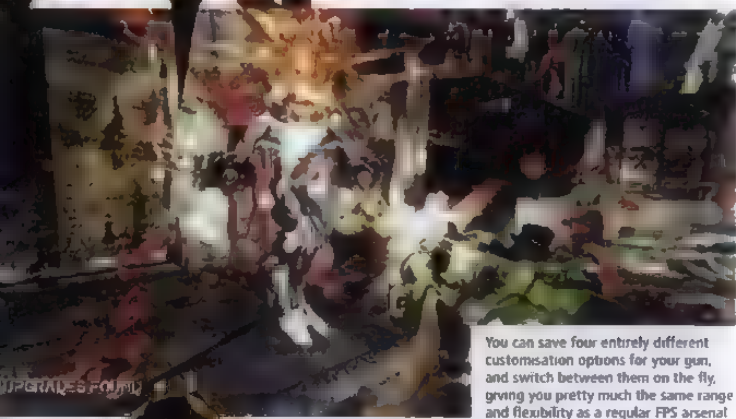
Nor is it without ideas of its own. The robotic menace you face in the game is under the control of tentacled, ethereal creatures known as Phantoms. When possessed by Phantoms, the robots operate with intelligence – taking cover and communicating with each other to flank you. Concentrate on blasting the Phantom off and the host robot becomes a dunderheaded tank. Destroy the robot first and the



Enemies are much more formidable when controlled by a Phantom – robots' freakish movements are augmented by their ability to traverse walls and ceilings if possessed

unseated Phantom will seek another one to possess – creating a trade-off between quickly reducing your enemies' tactical capabilities and thinning their numbers.

A more noticeable eccentricity is that you wield only a single upgradeable weapon you can 'pimp' with logos and custom paintjobs. It's an idea seen before in the racing genre, but its application here, if somewhat frivolous, promises that the way Metropolis combines its less original features could result in something novel after all.



You can save four entirely different customisation options for your gun, and switch between them on the fly, giving you pretty much the same range and flexibility as a regular FPS arsenal



Co-op sees a second player take control of either Tony Yayo, Lloyd Banks or DJ Whoo Kid

FORMAT 360, PS3
 PUBLISHER VIVENDI
 DEVELOPER SWORDFISH STUDIOS
 ORIGIN UK
 RELEASE 2009

50 Cent: Blood On The Sand

It's not just the exchange rate that devalues Fiddy's currency

Strange as it might seem, there are still those that have fond memories of 2005's *50 Cent Bulletproof*. As a game it was brutish, exploitative and technically flawed, but as a product it was immensely successful, selling over a million copies worldwide. With figures like that, the appearance of a sequel was inevitable.

With the suffix *Blood On The Sand* and a new developer, UK-based Swordfish Studios, which created PS2 FPS *Cold Winter*, this new instalment has the multi-platinum-selling rapper on a bloody and bizarre quest. He must retrieve a diamond-encrusted skull given to him as payment for a gig in a war-torn country that's now in the hands of international crime organisation.

While the action is bloody and Fiddy's close-quarter kills are particularly vicious, it's the location that has caused Vivendi the most anguish. Although producer Aaron Blean describes it as a "fictional Middle Eastern setting", the locations leave the impression that this is *50 Cent Goes To Iraq*. The official line, however, is that it is set in 'the hood beyond the hood', depicting an



Vehicle sections are, we're told, included at the behest of 50, who is an avid gamer. Those 65-inch plasma panels back at the crib need stuff to show them off, after all

everyman's war' compiled from a mix of modern conflicts. Even so, it's odd that Blean is anxious to point out the script is by "one of the few Muslim writers in Hollywood".

In order to get as much Curtis James Jackson III onscreen as possible, *Blood On The Sand* employs a *Gears Of War*-style perspective and cover system, but also features a combo system that has similarities to *The Club*. Along with the fact that it looks significantly technically tighter and far more polished than *Bulletproof*, there is still a hope that *Blood On The Sand* can transcend its dubious context.

Rated No.1

by The New York Times.



In a taste test of 16 Irish whiskies
by The New York Times,
Bushmills 10 year old
was rated top pick. (08/03/06)

IRISH at its BEST

SERIAL KILLER

THE BACK OF THE BOX MAY TALK ABOUT APOCALYPTIC FIRE AND BRIMSTONE, BUT THE REAL DRAMA OF ALONE IN THE DARK LURKS IN ITS STRUCTURE

The game begins with Carby waking up. As he regains consciousness, the character begins to talk at you. You have to flick the right thumbstick to blink and clear his groggy vision slowly and gingerly, looking around the environment. You have to click a lot around 30 times in all, because blinking will later become a key mechanic, and because Eden Games want this opening scene to be interactive. It becomes mildly irritating, though not on a par with the lead-in pacing of *Jerry Brinsford's Creed*, expositively, and you become aware of a tension within the game

to maintain interest through peaks of drama and economical exposition spread over individual episodes to be dropped in and out of, and easily picked up after a hiatus. Most importantly, you do take a series of rig everything up in that double header, you have to see it's perhaps the first videogame in history that really wants you to complete it.

Does that mean it's easy? Hardly. We fed many times within the first three sections. It means two things: that episodic structure and the ability to skip sections that threaten to see the pad throw away in frustration. It's not

cent to 30 per cent. It's scary. When I saw our statistics, and combined them with those from things like *Half-Life 2*, there are themes, and when you are making a game that is based on a story like this one, to play it and not finish it would be kind of a shame."

So the game is designed not only to be completed, but to maintain the player's interest in the ongoing narrative through devices lifted straight from television. Cometh the hour, cometh Jack Bauer, explains Nadal. "At that time 24 was on the TV in France and

"THE BIG HBO DRAMAS AND THE LIKE WERE COMING TO FRANCE. THEY WERE VERY EFFICIENT IN TERMS OF STORY, AND WE TOOK A LOT FROM THAT: WHY DON'T WE ANALYSE IT AND SEE IF WE CAN DO IT IN A VIDEOGAME?"

It's a tension between scripting and freedom between activity and interactivity. Perhaps even a tension between player and game.

It's nowhere near as obvious in the rest of the experience as it is here – and not necessarily a bad thing. *Alone In The Dark* has this tension because, perhaps surprisingly, it's one of the more high-concept in a *Strain* videogame you'll see this year. Not in terms of setting or mechanics – though they certainly have their moments. Not even in terms of the bare narrative itself – though that's a part of it. Never mind the pyrotechnic set pieces or the outstanding technical body. This is a game made to be used as a TVD score set on a and TV. In Eden's words, the narrative is designed

simply as a try-out for a principle rather than based on the empirical data collected by executive Eden Games. David Nadal, ATD's director, says: "We saw what happened with *Test Drive Unlimited*, Eden's previous game, and it's just amazing – the number of people who complete a game is incredibly low. For *TDU*, it was less than one per cent." That's hardly, though, a figure that would apply to all games, *TDU* being open-ended and extremely large. "I understand it's very extensive," counters Nadal, "but when you look at some of the first Achievements, to win three gold cups or ten gold cups, which I think is quite easy to do – every time you increase the stuff to do you drop from 50 per cent to 40 per

cent to 30 per cent. It's scary. When I saw our statistics, and combined them with those from things like *Half-Life 2*, there are themes, and when you are making a game that is based on a story like this one, to play it and not finish it would be kind of a shame."

we were so crazy about it. The big HBO dramas and the like were coming to France. They were very efficient in terms of story and we took a lot from that: why don't we analyse that and see if we can do it in a videogame?"

So *Alone In The Dark's* plot takes place over 20 episodes, each with an individual thread of high drama and ending on a cliffhanger note. Every time you come back to the game, a 'previously on' segment will be run, a deep-toned American voiceover summarising events as narrative snatches and action shots play out. At one point the game even included 'coming next' trailers, but Eden removed the feature in the interests of avoiding spoilers.

As for the 'skipping', it's not simply a tool

SERIAL KILLER

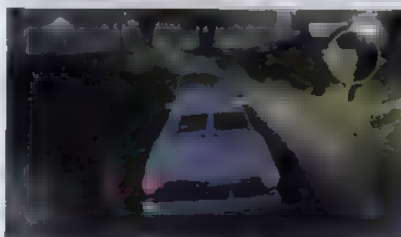


ALONE IN THE DARK
FORMAT: 3DS, PC, PS3
PUBLISHER: ATARI
DEVELOPER: GIGAWATT GAMES
FRANCE
RELEASE DATE: JUNE 2012

to watch the ending. It allows players to rump a particular challenge or puzzle that's proving a problem, and each episode is divided into discrete chunks around these possible obstacles — the game also tracks which sections of which episodes you've completed on the pause menu, so it's easy to go back. If you're so inclined, after you've worked something out. "I personally had a frustration playing games because I rarely finish them," says Nadal. "It's not because I don't have enough time. It's always because I'm stuck on a certain level or puzzle. I try, I try, and then I think, 'OK, I can't beat this — I may be too weak, I may be too stupid — let's try another one. It's a silly thing in games, and I didn't want it to define ours.'"

It's certainly a fresh take on how a game should reward its players, but how does this manifest itself on the screen and in the hands? After the banking, *Alone in The Dark's* opening is an extended escape from a collapsing building, and at its best has uncommonly good event scripting: a section in which Carnby has to traverse the building's facade — except on a — and sets the pulse racing ever on the third or fourth playthrough. Moment feeds into moment, and the attention paid to pacing and the projected scale of the production is obvious.

It's here that the benefits of an automatic camera become clear, though you can switch to a first-person view at any time, with grandiose vistas playing off against the small



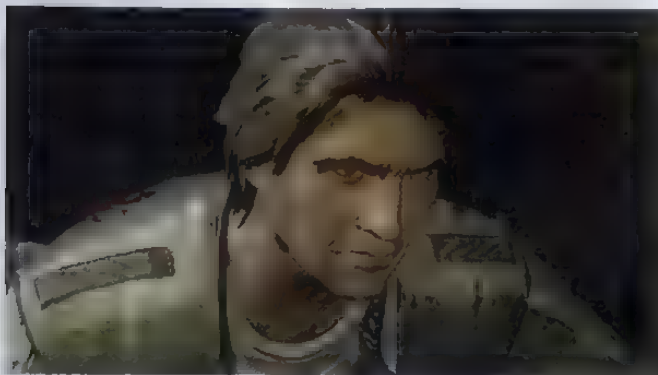
Clinging on by the fingernails is something that Carnby proves to be very good at — and every time this section (top) is played the debris seems to scatter in different ways. Less sensational, but equally thrilling, is gunning a car along Central Park's paths



rooms that direct Carnby towards the next skill to be learned, the next item to pick up, the next challenge to face. Checkpoints are well placed, although it's a tribute to *AITD's* otherwise unconventional approach that you wonder what might have been had the 24th ink gone the whole way: why should Carnby, after all, obey your command to jump to his death if you mistake which way to gain the opening? Should the hero himself back, or desperately grab on to the edge at the last moment, before clambering back up?

OPEN FOR BUSINESS

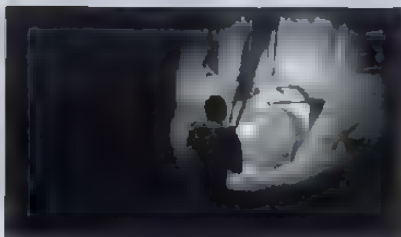
Another of *Alone in The Dark's* minor innovations is that every door in the game can be opened through simple force. "I am really frustrated when I am in front of a door with a full arsenal, and they are asking me for the golden key," says Nadal. "Even if we understand why they've done it, we decided we would not go into that comfort zone. This means that the doors are 'real' — if a door is wooden, you can burn it or break it down. Sometimes the designers would be putting in doors as a background and saying, 'It looks prettier', and I would say, 'Where is this door of yours going? Nowhere, so remove it.' It took effort, but every building in the game you can now have a look in, and there will always be something to do." Sounds good. "I know."



The game runs a gamut of graphical styles. Most notable, though, is bump-mapped Carnby's wavering between ages — he looks about 60 at certain points, 25 at others

"I RARELY FINISH GAMES. NOT BECAUSE I DON'T HAVE ENOUGH TIME, BUT BECAUSE I'M STUCK. IT'S SILLY, AND I DIDN'T WANT IT TO DEFINE THIS GAME"

Wouldn't the path's episodic format if it didn't have the instant deaths, loading screens and restarts that it does, but used player error to heighten the atmosphere of tension — rather than break it? It will be fascinating to see what sort of future developments in game mechanics may be inspired by *AITD's* unorthodox construction.

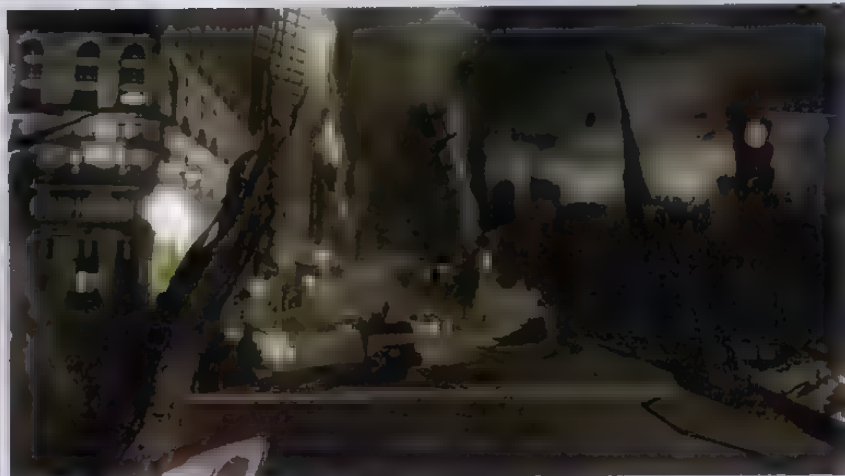


There are real concerns, however. The enemy AI isn't exceptional in general terms, though it is capable of delivering surprises on random occasions. A cinematic car chase, meanwhile, is slightly tainted by the ease with which you can die, combined with an unforgiving restart. So there's a conflicting story about *AITD* itself: the hint of a masterpiece is most definitely there, but beneath some problems. There's also a less salutary point. The preview code produced in early April, throws up more than a few bugs and glitches. This is, of course, quite common in the realms of early looks, but perhaps not to this extent, this late in development. Is it one too early to be seeing such an ambitious game, an already-delayed title that has the faint teatime perhaps of something that needed just one or two months more? To be fair,



THE GUN IS THE CLICHÉ

The original *ATD* game arguably created many of the genre conventions Eden is trying to escape from. "When you look at the clichés of the genre it is always set in an old manor or non-populated place," mentions Nadal in an aside, and begins to warm to his theme: "The enemies and the guns – these are big clichés, maybe the real clichés for games. We wanted to get away from weapons, zombies, shotgunning enemies." It's fair to point out that *Alone in the Dark* does seem to have one or two of these elements present. "One thing I wanted to do at the beginning that wasn't possible was a game without a gunsight or guns," admits Nadal. "We came to a compromise. This inventory is more creative, dealing with what you find in everyday surroundings."



The mysterious enemy manifests itself as fissures, which quickly leads to a stunning set-piece car escape as New York begins collapsing around, behind and in front of you. The depth-of-field filter is a frequent, and well-used, effect

Eden is certainly taking a constructive approach to such problems – when we contacted Eden for clarification concerning a few particular knots, senior producer No. 10 on took lengthy notes and later responded with specific details of problems that were in the process of being addressed, and feedback on how other, more general, bugs were being tackled.

There will be more speculation until release, although it's worth remembering that *Alone in the Dark* is a huge game for Atari – crucial, even – which simply has to

deliver critically and commercially. For Eden Games, on the other hand, the project looks a most like a personal quest – a desire to try something as distinct from *TDL* as possible to create an experience in a new genre and rewrite some videogame rules. Its episodic structure and consistency for the player already, feel like something that may one day become a kind of standard, and combined with the involving set-pieces that games do so well – could demand the return of the oft-used phrase "interactive drama" but, in this case, as a term of praise.







THE FRESH PRINCE

Gaming's most famous character is back
but this time the only sand is in the desert

March in Montreal is anything but Arabian Nights. The winter has overstayed, the drifts of snow still piled waist-high alongside roads and pavements. Such falls are usually ploughed and scooped into trucks, to be dumped elsewhere, but the lingering, sub-zero temperatures mean these snowfalls are already full, and refusing to thaw. The balmy, sultry settings of the new *Prince Of Persia* must feel even more worlds away than the typical fantasy-holiday escape of a videogame. But spring is in the air within Ubisoft Montreal's enormous studio – housing some 1,500 people – even if it isn't outside. The *Prince Of Persia* development family is expanding rapidly with a new brood, absorbing staff from other, completed projects as production goes into overdrive, and in preparation for whatever 1,001 nights of crunch lie in wait as it heads towards *POP's* end-of-year

PRINCE OF PERSIA
360 DS, PC, PS3
UBISOFT
CONCEPT ART BY [unreadable]
[unreadable]
WINTER



Obligatory inter-generational yardstick: the new Prince displays 13 times more polygons than his last-gen relation, more than Altair in *Assassin's Creed*. There are more polygons to be found in the new character's hair than in the whole of the previous Prince

release. And while the team is marking out fresh in-house territory to bulk up its work force, *POP* itself is due to cover its own fresh ground. Given the previous games in the series, this new direction is surprising. Given the bigger-picture tendencies of gaming in recent years, it's perhaps not surprising at all: *Prince Of Persia* is going open-world.

Before the openness, first the world itself. This is a brand new prince in a brand new setting, but the heart of its style and the essence of its themes remain intact. As does the kernel of its creators: most of the core development team has worked on the previous *POP* trilogy, including creative director **Jean-Christophe Guyot**, who explains, "We had a whole story with the previous trilogy, and *Prince Of Persia* is a general universe where several different stories can unfold. We're starting afresh, in the same universe, and we wanted to bring something new while keeping what worked before. We introduce a new Prince, who won't start as a prince, more a drifter and adventurer, lost in the desert. He'll be confronted by a lot of fantasy settings, as opposed to *Assassin's Creed*, which was more realistic. Here he will come to a land and be engulfed in the conflict between two ancient gods, in this very specific region of Persia. It's based on an old Persian religion, Zoroastrianism, and the battle between light and darkness."

"The Sands of Time are dead and gone," adds producer **Ben Mattes**. "It really is a new chapter. The previous one was about the Sands of Time, with its own prince, its own struggles. But this is



the same universe, with a new story. Possibilities for enticing storylines and characters are endless with such a rich, colourful, shape-shifting and magical universe. So there are as many stories of the Prince as there are versions of the Prince himself – they all co-exist, they all share prodigious abilities and a liking for dauntless adventures and trouble. Our hero finds himself

“In terms of style, we know we’re on the right track. We don’t have to showcase technology, we can just use it. It’s no longer about how shiny our rocks are”

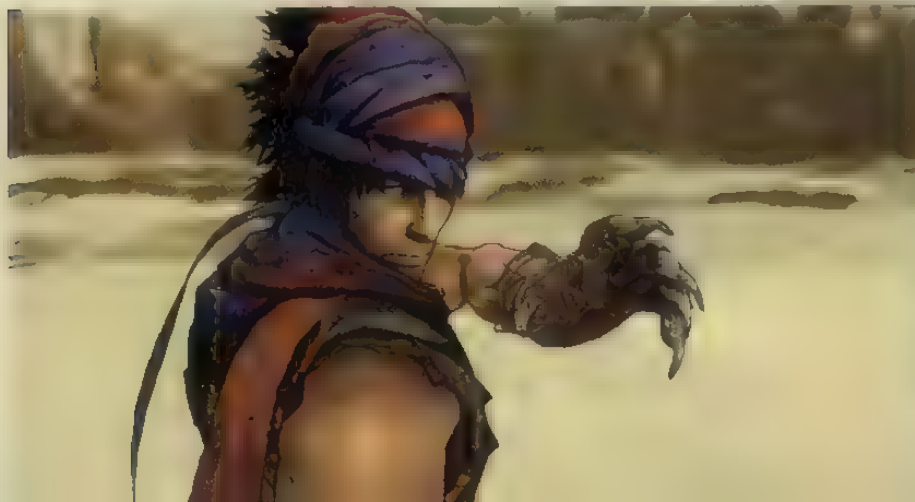
caught up in an epic battle between the primal forces of light and darkness: the god of light, Ormazd, versus his brother, Ahriman, the god of darkness. The Prince arrives just in time to witness the destruction of the legendary Tree of Life – an act which threatens to plunge the entire world into eternal darkness.”

Work began on *POP* once *Two Thrones*, the final link in the last-gen trilogy, was completed. It’s based on the same engine as *Assassin’s Creed*, *Anvil*, and was split from it some one-and-a-half years ago, to be evolved as needed (see ‘Sussing creed’). Of course, *Anvil* has proven itself to be a robust piece of tech, evidenced by *Creed*’s phenomenal Middle-Eastern cityscapes, but such pseudo-realism is beyond *POP*’s remit. Which, as the game’s visual art director **Mickael Labat**

puts it, is: “Fantasy, but credible. We want to create a game with style, and we don’t go with realism, so we go with caricature. Artistically, the inspirations are Japanese movies – like *Princess Mononoke*, not just for the story, but also for the characters – they’re not just black and white, but more mature. A lot of comic books, too, as I’m a big fan, and a lot of games with big, strong artistic direction like *Okami*, plus some parts of the new *Street Fighter* and *Mirror’s Edge* – these are all good references. It’s a mix of a lot of things.”

“When we started to work on this *Prince Of Persia*, we wanted it to be different from other next-gen games. A lot of them tend towards realistic graphics, featuring many technical details, such as normal maps and specular... we use those things, but much more softly than in, say, *Gears Of War*. We’ve taken a lot of time to create post-effects and textures for this. It’s a more painterly style than other games. A vast fantasy world... that’s what we want

to have. There’s the flying castle...” Wait a second – a flying castle? “The flying castle is a very fantastical setting,” elaborates Guyot. Really? “Very big, and when you reach it, it’s not flying at all, it’s just swallowed in clouds, and then you’ll get to see the structure underneath it. In terms of style, we know we’re on the right track when you consider something like the new *Street Fighter*... we’re not as extreme as that, but it’s on the same wavelength. We don’t have to showcase technology, we can just use it. It’s no longer about how shiny our rocks are.” One of the greatest differentiators between this and previous games, however, is pointed out by Mattes: “The richness and the high quality of the Persian environments have always been a key element of *POP* games. We’re





Producer Ben Mattes (above), creative director Jean-Christophe Guyot (centre) and art director Mickael Labat (top). Mattes worked on *POP: The Two Thrones*, while the latter pair were involved in some capacity or other on all three last-gen *Prince Of Persia* titles



now able to create vast outdoor worlds, whereas in previous *POP* games, the player was mostly confined inside palaces or cities."

There will, of course, be palaces and courtyards and other perennial settings, but they're now just components of a great outdoors, one unified, open-plan world, instead of a glamorous sequence of funnels and high concept caverns. If the goal is to retain a certain

"We really wanted players to feel they're directly responsible for a little chunk of the healed world, so that they could stand atop a cliff, look out over the entire world, and say, 'I did that'"

signature flair – that of dusky, plumply bloomed environments – while upping production quality to match artwork intricacy, then it appears to be very much on track. Seeing a great crescent of ancient structures yawn out across a mountain crest into the distance is an affecting sight, especially given what the modern-era Prince himself is capable of, as one of gaming's most forthright exponents of free-running fluidity

The game world itself does not yet have a name – Mattes often refers to it as the 'Walled Garden' – but it does have a problem: The Corruption. This is Ahriman's infection, a dark, choking mass that's spread like cancer over the Walled Garden. It's not a light/dark mirror world dynamic along the lines of *A Link To The Past* or *Metroid Prime 2: Echoes*, but an overcoat that's smeared over and suffocated the area, *Okami*-style. "The world has two states," says Mattes. "Sometimes things look very dark, very oppressive – there's this black fog, this oily substance infecting the world, called The Corruption. In other places where The Corruption is absent, the world looks bright and healed and much more vibrant. We've developed the technology to have this world in two completely distinct states that we can toggle between in realtime. Part of the core game experience is that you need to bring life back to this cursed world. But we didn't want a situation where the player would just press a button, and watch a cinematic as the world

healed itself. We really wanted them to feel ownership for healing the world at every step of the way, that they're directly responsible for a little chunk of the healed world, and they'd then have to hly-pad this healing presence over the whole world, so that they could stand atop a cliff, look out over the entire world, and say, 'I did that'. As such, we developed the technology behind it to be able to take a sub-section of the

world, put a gameplay mechanic within it by which the player is able to drive The Corruption from out of that section, and allow us to dynamically switch between the cursed and the healed state of that one section."

The contrast is already there, already palpable. The Corruption itself is a jagged, icky

The game's enormous, Anvil-powered environments sometimes recall the warm glow of the best in the series to date, but the unique art style renders them with a flavour that is their own



eyesore, a demonic oil spill of pollution. And when a stretch of land is cleansed, it's like gaming's answer to a toothpaste ad, a money shot of breathe-out restoration that makes your efforts feel worthwhile. It's about more than just aesthetics, though, which is where the open-world paradigm comes in. Which isn't to say *POP* is free-roaming. That's a distinction worth making. You won't be swanning around the game's breadth at your leisure, choosing when and when not to dip into quests. But it *is* truly non-linear, allowing you to cleanse the game's areas in your own preferred order. "We really wanted to create a *POP* experience where the player had a much greater authorship over their global experience, so that it wasn't a completely linear game where they played through it once, and that was it," continues Mattes. "At the same time, we recognised you will never get the *POP* experience we want – those long strings of choreographed acrobatics – from a true sandbox. We adopted an open-world structure where the player has macro-level choice in how it unfolds, how the story unfolds, in terms of which regions to visit and which times, and which bosses they fight and when. They have that choice, so it'll unfold differently for each player. But at the micro level, where you need to clear the hundred feet in front of you, say, we can still have that directed *POP* experience – hit that beam, hit that column, swing off that vine, flip off that whatever – and you'll still reach your target in a very stylised way. We think we have the best of both worlds. The linear focus where you can pull off spectacular acrobatics, but with much more player choice than there has ever been in a *POP* before."

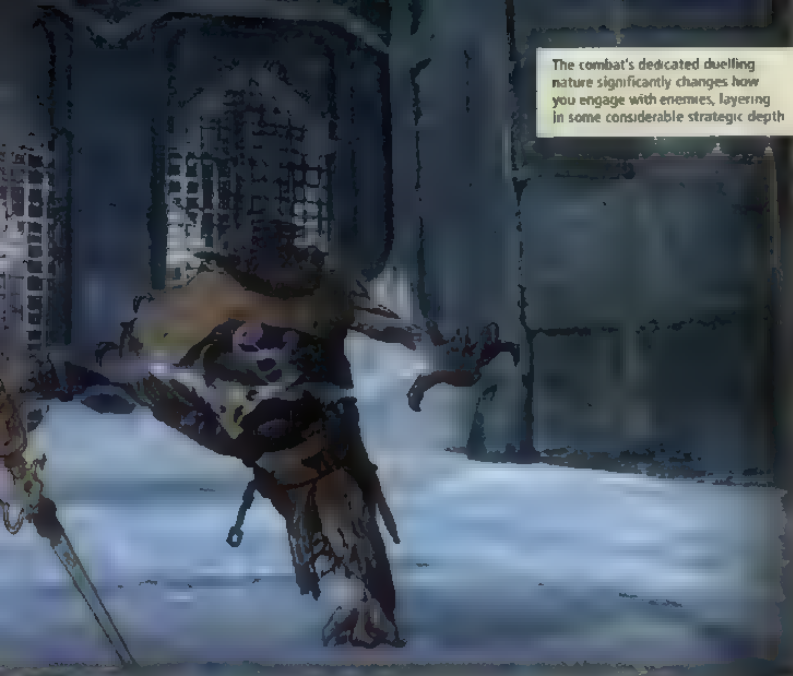




While open-ended gaming is where *POP* is going, it nearly went elsewhere, to something more in line with, say, *Burnout Paradise*. "We've tried a number of different approaches," explains Guyot. "One was really, really open. Since we were using the *Assassin's* engine, we were at first thinking it's maybe not the best idea, since we want to differentiate, but let's check and see what we can do with it anyway. But with *Assassin's Creed*, when going from point A to B, you're not usually forced to be cool. You could just walk it, take the easy road. That was one of our iterations. Another was more of an open structure, that had branches as dungeons, an open world – a true hub – you could roam. It was interesting, and we even included mounts. The feeling was nice, and you'd have these different regions that would slowly blend into a dungeon, but it was too separate. It wasn't at all *Prince Of Persia*, and there were dungeons you'd see just once, and that's a lot of production for not a lot of result. With the completely open game, when we playtested it, the feedback from players was so-so. It was a little confusing, they weren't chaining moves – the behaviour we saw was that they'd perform a short burst of acrobatics before looking around and deciding where to go next. It's not where we wanted to go; we wanted something more fluid. And from there, we have our current iteration."



Mattes offers an analogy for *POP's* unfolding: *The Odyssey*. "You have *The Battle of Troy*, and *Ulysses* returning home. You can flip between the islands encountered on his journey in your own order"



The combat's dedicated duelling nature significantly changes how you engage with enemies, layering in some considerable strategic depth

In some ways, this framework is more open than your common or garden GTA facsimile Mission structure is, by comparison, a linear corridor within free-roaming templates. And here's how it'll work: when one area is cleansed of Corruption, the remaining infected regions effectively 'level up'. The threat posed will increase, as will the severity and strength of the enemies you face. Through this, the idea of the player's own story will manifest, at least more effectively than simply offering the option of non-linear mission completion. The idea of facing 'enemies', plural, in POP is misleading, however. Whereas combat in the previous trio of titles became increasingly intricate – evolving from simple acrobatic swordplay, to dual-wield combo elaboration, to stealth/speed kill assassinations – it's now returning to a straightforward but valiant ideal. Every fight in POP will be a duel. No group battles, just one foe at a time. "Combat is a game in and of itself," says Mattes. "Early on we were faced with a decision about what to do with combat. POP eventually moved towards a pretty cool system, then *God Of War* came along and, basically, just kicked our ass. We could go head to head with *God Of War* or *Ninja Gaiden*, or strike out on our own path."

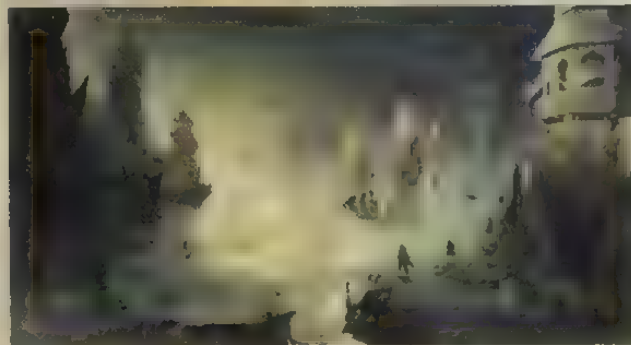
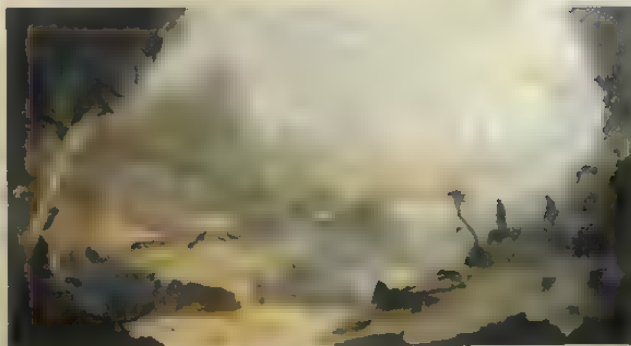
"It was more interesting for us to have one significant enemy, a challenge, that you're glad to have surpassed," adds Guyot. "So we focused on duel-type fights; also we wanted the hero to be fallible. In *Drake's Fortune*, for example, he's human, but he also kills like 10,000 people. The way we have it now, it's as it was in the very first *Prince Of Persia*, where each confrontation with a single enemy was intense." Throughout all this, a number of influences are admitted – Errol Flynn, *Final Fantasy: Advent Children*, even *The Princess Bride*: "We really want to play off the strategic advantages of the environments. One of the first movies we watched when researching the combat system was *The Princess Bride*. There's the duel scene where they're really

HOUSE STYLE

With the swollen head

prolific publishers are
reactions and churning
there are other, obvious
advantages at work.
series: "Having people
on our team that have
already shipped multiple

studies that are working
on their first next-gen
game, or just starting on
their second. We have
people on our team already
onto their third. That's the
benefit of a studio as
large as this one: even
three or four months
there's something
finished, feeding up 100 or
so people into a pool for
other projects."



taking the environment into consideration. If you and your enemy have plenty of space behind you, whoever swings fastest will win. But if you're pushing your enemy up against a wall or a ledge, you immediately have an advantage. Not only will you be using the environment, but so will enemies. Every fight in the game should feel like a boss fight. The feeling of being up against a very difficult adversary who's every bit the swordsman you are, and you have to use all of your strategy and skill just to get past him; maybe you don't kill him, just drive him off. That'll happen often – you'll drive an enemy away, then they'll stalk you to return and fight again. I really think our fighting system is unlike anything anyone has seen in an action-adventure game before. I hope it creates a signature component of the POP experience, one we've never had before, that was lacking the past."

There's another new, significant component to be mentioned, but we can't talk about it here. POP has another twist up its sleeve, one that'll be fundamental to everything – the puzzles, the duels, the clambering – but Ubisoft is keeping this one pressed against its chest, for now. Neither is it committing to any line on whether or not this is the beginning of a trilogy. For now, we'll have to be contented with the prospect of a character who, when he was reborn one generation ago, felt like he could lithely and capably go virtually anywhere, and is now preparing to do just that







GREAT SCOTT

NOKIA'S NEXT GREAT HOPE FOR MOBILE GAMING UNVEILS THE NEW N-GAGE'S FLAGSHIP TITLE, PROJECT WHITE ROCK

Think of mobile games and you think of *Angry Birds*, *Sudoku*, or *Angry Birds*. They can be summed up in a line: collect food to grow your snake, build up your tower from blocks. Scott Foe's new game, known until now as Project White Rock, is *Reset Generation*, and it's almost impossible to nail down with a snappy description.

But though it might be hard to 'get', Foe claims that it's the highest production value mobile game ever made, and that it will shatter expectations of the platform. Such words from many mouths might be dismissed as bluster, but Foe's background makes him unwise to ignore. He's the designer of *Pocket Kingdom: Own The World*, which was hailed as being the first mobile MMOG and designed specifically for N-Gage's mobile and connected nature. With this, along with its irreverent yet affectionate textual pokes at gamer culture, it cut a distinctive figure not only on a platform that offered all too few experiences that it could call its own, but also on portable consoles as a whole: confident, daring and an obvious declaration of a love for gaming.

A game designer and producer for Nokia, Foe has demonstrated that he has a deep understanding of the strengths of mobile

phones for gaming. But, more crucially, he also knows how to harness them. So it's little surprise that the Finnish giant is looking to him to define a new generation of games for N-Gage's rebirth, and to ultimately reinvigorate a platform that once appeared capable of supplanting the likes of Nintendo's handhelds, and has entirely failed to do so. *Reset Generation* is his answer.

But, though speculation as to the nature of the project has assumed it to be an expansive development of *Pocket Kingdom* into mobile MMOGs, *Reset Generation* willfully plays to more established gametypes. At base, it's a turn-based online strategy game, but that hardly does it justice. Conceptually, it's an explosion of ideas and appropriations from other games, both in mechanics and aesthetics. Its characters are parodies of the most familiar videogame tropes – a plumber, a hedgehog, an alien, a blocky alien spacecraft. It hinges on the basic aim of having your avatar capture your opponents' princesses and return them to your castle. It involves special powers and item drops. It features a soundtrack of crazed, C64-style music with track names like *Nin 1000* and *Raver*. It asks you to drop *Tetris*-like blocks on to the board to form 'combos'

This storm of mechanics and references, the latter a reprise of *Pocket Kingdom*'s leit-motif and pokes at MMOG culture, threatens to capsize the game. After all, it's made for mobile, so must be tuned for short matches of five or ten minutes, and also for multiplayer with up to four competitors, and all the ensuing need for balance. But while it initially feels bewildering, even random, rules coalesce and strategies appear. It's a brave departure from the way mobile games usually work, and Foe is bullish about it. "Do you remember when you didn't know the submachine gun did so much damage over time and there were things you hadn't seen before?" he says in his deliberate, deep, west-coast drawl. "We're bringing it back to that point before you didn't know a pig ate blocks and the joy at discovering that. If you want to plant the flag, you've got to dare to be different."

Play is divided into three phases. The first is to drop a tetronimoe onto the board to create

RESET GENERATION
 PUBLISHER: NOKIA
 DEVELOPER: REDLYN
 REGION: US/FINLAND
 RELEASE: SUMMER '11

paths that lead to your opponents' castles or fallen items – your avatar can move further on your blocks, and runs of five become 'combos' denoted by stars, which aid movement still further. When each player has a position and orientation, the blocks are all dropped; squares with multiple drop attempts are left void. The second is the movement phase, and the third is firing off two bombs to destroy non-combo blocks as a way of carving out space and preventing opponents from making combos, or items (though hitting an item twice will protect it). All control is with one thumb: the directional buttons select position and the centre button confirms moves.

Apart from the central aim of setting out for opponents' princesses and rushing home with them, the liberal scatters of powerful items mean it's seldom wise to make direct journeys. Some items, like the paintbrush, lay strips of self-coloured combos; springs bounce you across the board; monster boxes release block-eating pigs or player-attacking wolves.

"WE DIDN'T JUST WANT TO DO ANOTHER GAME, WE WANTED TO MAKE SOMETHING THAT MATTERS"

Already the description of the game is becoming hard to relate clearly – the number of strategies and options for play available at any time is startling. Do you protectively loiter around your own castle and find grenades to lob at opponents to reduce their health bar so they're softened up by the time they close in? Do you build up your special-power bar and a network of combos so you can nip in to steal a princess and escape in a single turn? Do you boost how far you can move next turn by dropping your blocks on your castle? Or spam opponents by collecting as many monster boxes as possible? Ultimately, success lies in a deep understanding of the 'basic' rules, the strengths of each item and each avatar's capabilities, from the Plumber's ability to charm princesses into fetching him items to Dr. Lovebomber's Lovebomb, which creates blocks of his colour and severely damages opponents; Hedgehog's screen-crossing roll move to Sci-Fi Knight's ability to mind-control enemies.

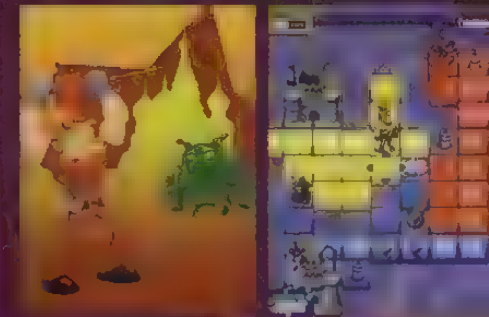
The apparent chaos is intentional, though, and down to the nature of the mobile phone. "Mobile games have to allow you to quit any time, but you don't want to encourage this, because you see people doing it when they realise they've totally lost," he says. "It's about making it so that players always feel that even though they're down this turn they can be up again soon." But awarding last-place players with arbitrary superpowers of the likes of *Mario Kart*'s dread blue shell is the wrong way to design this. "You can't be cheap. If we wanted to be lazy, we could have the most

powerful item in the game drop to the losing player, but consumers can smell that from a mile off. It's like giving a poker player five aces every time they're down to their last chip. So we had to do it mechanically and in a way that makes sense." Therefore, *Reset Generation*'s cardinal rubber-bands are the superpowers. Because they power up every time your opponents successfully make combos, losers are kept tantalisingly in the match. Items, meanwhile, are dropped randomly, with the fundamental aim of making sure that "a really good player will win nine times out of ten".

Such depth of play is intentional, too, because Foe intends *Reset Generation* to have longevity. "There's no seasonality in mobile games – mom won't wrap one up for you for Christmas. And there's no shelf space needed, so we're looking at an 18-month or three-year sales cycle. We set out to make this game non-perishable from the beginning." And, though each match will take only five or ten minutes, it's all built around the aim to make the game, in Foe's words, 'unfairly addictive'. "There's a

reason why it's called Project White Rock," he says. Its hectic blend of audiovisual feedback – voice samples, scrolling text and exploding pixel parities – is tempered well by the more measured cycle of the three phases, creating a compulsive pace. Much attention has evidently been given to the way *Reset Generation* has implemented turns, its counter to the fact that on mobile phones seven-second network latencies come as standard. Though players simultaneously choose their actions according to a strict time limit, they're played out on the board one after another. To prevent the pace from faltering during the warts until you can make your next input or see the results of your last one, the board is larger than the screen, so a significant portion of play is scrolling around to follow the action and plan the next phase. "We always keep your mind working, even if technically nothing's happening," says Foe. Longevity is part of the reason Foe decided that *Reset Generation* would use 2D rather than the 3D that mobile phones can now render. "We didn't just want to do another game, we wanted to make something that matters. 3D games are perishable," he says. "Technology moves on, and what looked great 18 months ago doesn't look so hot now. If you make a 2D game, it's non-perishable. It's a great game forever, and we wanted this to be the game of decades."

As such, Foe, dryly hyperbolic as he is, is proud of the game's visual style. "I mean, no pixel was left behind in making this game," he says. It's certainly painstakingly detailed, with





The middle of the board can end up a clutter of different colored blocks, but, as Foo (left) says, "According to the Art Of War, if all the opponents are going for the middle, you should..."

Ranking

Near You

1	Big_Hen	2037
2	soot(ho)	2074
3	bighen	2072
4	soot(ho)	2053
5	Mr_Full	2047
6	Kimssul	2043
7	CoolFest	2042

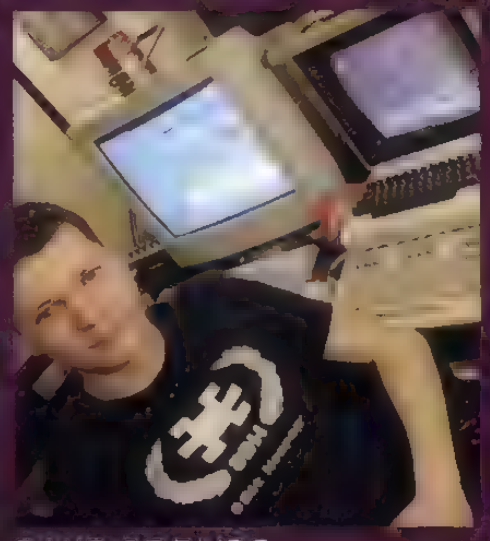
Friends Near You

2	soot(ho)	2074
7	CoolFest	2042
3	babel	2033

Top 10 Players

1	Big_Hen	2037
2	soot(ho)	2074

Back Back



BAND OF BLIPS

Reset Generation's frenetic vintage-styled videogame soundtrack is by LA-based chiptune band 8 Bit Weapon, fronted by Seth Sternberger (above), which uses a mixture of the likes of Commodore 64 and Game Boy sound chips and live drums. "They were a great find for the project," says Foo. "All these names were being tossed around, but I wanted someone that worshipped the music, right? Someone that breathes videogame music. I was in Kentia Hall at E3 in 2005 when I met Seth, and I knew he was the one." The soundtrack was one of the first elements of the game to be completed. "It wouldn't be too much to say that the music helped shape the game," Foo concludes.



Users' avatars (used) from the music to all graphics will be made freely available via the website so that few can build their own games and other stuff with them. The best will be displayed on the site.

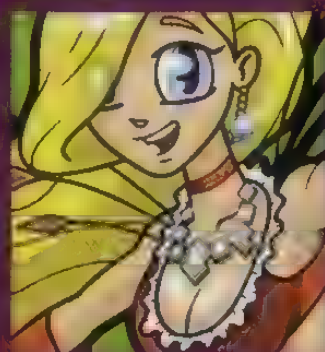


FIRE YOUR CANNONS!



FIGHT CLUB

Though *Reset Generator's* characters were designed by different artists, they manage to demonstrate a good deal of consistency – even down to the focus on the female characters' breasts. For "I'm pretty sure that every single one that had a female character came back showing big décolletage. We didn't give any guidelines. This game wasn't meant to pursue conservatives, it was meant to start them, so it had to say something about our industry." With each given its own backstory, the process of putting the characters together has evidently been a pleasure in which Foe has taken great pleasure: The Plumber was originally meant to be Finnish as a nod to Nokia, but became Russian due to Foe's admiration of Robert's Fleury @foval.



The Princess was designed by Owen Glen, artist behind *Sore Thumbs Online* and upcoming comic *The Last Blood*



The psychotic Hedgehog was the work of The Behemoth's Dan Paladin, artist for *Alien Hominid* and *Castle Crashers*



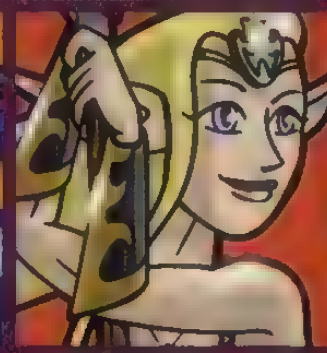
Foe says that villain Dr. Lavebomber, by Owen Glen, is closest to his heart because "his last words to be 'Reset'"



Aggressor the space invader was designed by Scott Kurtz, who created popular gaming webcomic *Putt' Online*



Iron Clung, designer of *Cyberg*, has been senior art director at RM, creating the look for *War Of The Worlds*



Woody Keen, artist behind @UCamlin, a web comic about MMOGs, created *Lord of the Rings*, who was a fan of *War of the Worlds*



Meja was designed by Jay Aki, an artist on BioWare's *Sonic Chronicles* and also the *Street Fighter* comic



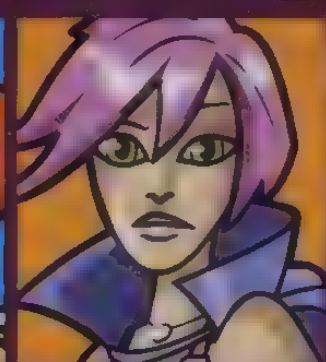
Being Commander and Star Wars, Feng Zhu designed Babe Gunner, a water-mouthed parody of Leia Organa



The tall, blonde, Russian Plumber was designed by Darrel Bower, an animator for *The Simpsons* and *Animaparc*



An artist on *Miso* is Phil Saunders, who was inspired by street fashion in Harajuku, Tokyo for *Monster Train*



Sci-Fi Knight by Christian Gosssett, who conceived Darth Maul's double-ended lightsaber and now works at *Wes*





The *Reset Generation* website is a big part of the game, with player profiles, match replays and a complete version of the game available to play for free.



every direct encounter between characters, played out with a little cutaway animation, and incidental events, as small as they appear on the screen, shown right down to the pin falling away from a thrown grenade. "We focused on artwork, not graphics," says Foe, explaining how he found well-known artists to design each avatar to pick out their personality and humour. They have their own backstories, told in part through the singleplayer mode, which acts as a gentle introduction and tutorial. Foe refers to the way that cartoon and TV series are built up, with characters being developed and given their own spin-offs, so perhaps we'll find the likes of Level 50 Elf having her own game at some point. Certainly, the breadth of the character roster supports a wide swathe of traditional gametypes.

Like the rest of the game, the characterisation revolves around a love of videogames, but with a mobile audience that doesn't necessarily have any experience in all its references. It was important that the love didn't get in the way. "We wanted it to be a homage, but we didn't want the homage to get in the way of the game," explains Foe. "If you've played videogames you'll find nuance and layer, nuance and layer. But at the same time you don't have to have played a game before to enjoy this one. Ever seen *Kill Bill*? You don't have to know that she's wearing Bruce Lee's tracksuit to enjoy the film. That's the hallmark of an excellent homage there, and I feel that we've really come up with

Reset Generation's website, which will be a reliquary for multiplayer battle statistics, with players each having a page. Apart from Point-to-Pickups (*Reset Generation's* equivalent of Xbox Live's Achievements), belts are displayed there, a set of unique awards that only one person will hold at a time: best Plumber, best Babe, Gunner, most princesses rescued. The site will also archive and display match replays, for which Foe cites his favourite game, *WarCraft III*, as the inspiration. "I used to watch replays at wcreplays.com and the commentary and whatnot, and it makes me think that it's only a matter of time before somebody finds an entertaining format in which to show that on television. For me, playing replays in the browser is exciting because it's one step closer to expanding gaming as passive entertainment, and I think that is a very possible future."

And, for Foe, the future of gaming is on mobile phones. "Oh, I know, the joke goes that games are movies' red-headed stepchild, and mobile is worse off still. But at the end of the day it's all software. And as all these devices gain in power, whether they're in your pocket or on your desk or in your living room, you're going to reach a point of no-compromise convergence. It's coming." He envisages a new generation of phones with powerful processors using onboard pico-projectors to display games on a wall, or streaming the video directly to TVs; the immobile nature of current-day consoles is just an interim solution. But the technology isn't the question: "It's about the content you'll be playing on that system, and

"MOBILE GAMING ISN'T JUST ABOUT THE LOW-END EXPERIENCES YOU FIND PACKED IN YOUR PHONE"

something that comes up very strong in its own right." The game's sense of humour is also meant to appeal broadly: "I feel that we've really balanced out the humour for adults. It's not over-the-top risqué but it's not completely soaked in childlike innocence either."

Foe acknowledges that the effect of all the game's complexity – its rules, its visual style, its sense of humour – might ensure players are drawn in for a long time, but the trade-off is a daunting initiation. His solution is a complete, and completely free, version of the game that can be played on the web. "It's going to be a widget, right? You can embed it anywhere you want and show people that mobile isn't just the low-end experiences you find packed in to your phone – it can be beautiful and amazing." To convince the higher-ups at Nokia that it was a good idea to give it away, Foe showed how it could be a useful way of marketing N-Gage as a whole, and also how *Jetix* makes millions of dollars each year on mobile, yet is free to play on the web, too.

Indeed, Foe is paying great attention to

that future isn't far off, it's connecting online. "All this while playing with your friends – isn't that something you'd like in your pocket?"

The big name that's hanging over the conversation, however, is iPhone, surely closer to Foe's vision of convergence than their N81s on which we've been playing *Reset Generation*. On the day we meet, in fact, *Quake III* has been made to run on Apple's device. "I'm not here to talk about iPhone," says Foe. "Nokia's interested in big markets; we have a device in one in seven pockets on the planet, and over 50 per cent of the people that have these devices play games on them."

What does this mean for *Reset Generation*? Is a game built squarely for today's technology designed to reach audiences that don't tend to take mobile gaming seriously? "We don't do small things. *Reset Generation* is meant to be imperishable, so it's the way you're enjoying it that will change. We mean for this to be the highest production value mobile title ever."

mean to put the flag on the summit.



LINKS' AWAKENING

FIRST, INDIE STALWART GARAGEGAMES TOOK ON THE PUBLISHING ELITE. NOW IT'S TRANSFORMING 3D WEB GAMING

You could tell what they really wanted to do was *World Of Warcraft*...

"Meets MySpace..."

"Yeah, meets MySpace. But with a space theme. Habbo Hotel, but with a MySpace theme..."

"Yeah, everyone wanted some sort of virtual world with minigames in it..."

In the main, the utterances of GarageGames' **Josh Williams** embody his company's design philosophy of clarity and directness. But when he thinks back on the awful meetings he endured before finding investors for its latest venture, he can't help but slip into a wacky double-act routine with colleague **Andy Yang**, who went through a similarly hopeless search himself.

It was only when they finally ended up meeting each other – Williams as CEO of GarageGames, Yang as representative of prospective investor Interact – that each realised somebody else did get it after all. That compulsion to dress simple, good ideas up in sub-Hollywood 'X-meets-Y' pitch-speak is funny to them now, but only because they're having the last laugh. After all, for GarageGames – the group of creatives behind the *Tribes* series and, more recently, XBLA hit *Marble Blast Ultra* – the InstantAction website beta that went public in March is just what both envisioned, realised with no superfluous bells and whistles: it's a site that harnesses web 2.0 logic to seamlessly deliver quality online gaming experiences at the click of a link.

The sensation of déjà vu upon landing at instantaction.com is entirely intentional. The homepage is a restrained fusion of a YouTube or Facebook with the ordered, but still excitable, look of a major gaming review site. Click 'Play' for a streaming promotional clip that starts immediately

and, typically, the whole concept is economically explained in 40 seconds: send an instant message, click a URL, and play one of a range of attractive new 3D videogames whose familiar genres and essential gameplay are instantly conveyed. If you're browsing with Firefox or IE on a half-decent PC (that's half-decent on your average PC World bargain hunter's terms, rather than those of *Crysis*) then after a swift, one-off sign-up you can click right through to play bots, friends or strangers. No other programs, no downloads, no cost, no cat-and-mouse group connection efforts





InstantAction



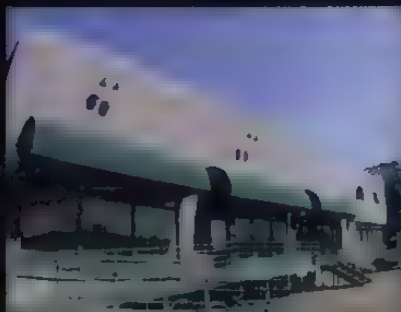
Frankly, even 'plug in and play' sounds like a laborious concept when software a world away from the popular conception of web games as "shitty little toys" (Williams' words) is as easy to get into as Google.

"At the time we started," Williams recalls, "there were really only two kinds of game project. You could either go and set up a triple-A project and put hundreds of people on it and spend millions of dollars – and we just didn't have the money to do that, so that would mean going to a draconian publisher or whatever to get the game done, and ultimately work on one title maybe, in our whole studio, over the course of three years – or, the only other viable thing to do at the time was to make a casual game, and we had no interest in making another magic Wii game or whatever.

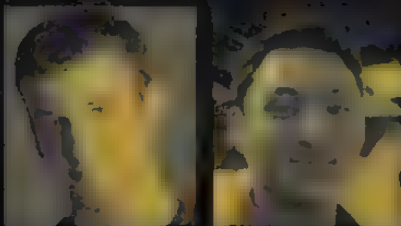
"We thought, we want to play a core action game but we don't want to spend \$15 million to build it and grind it out for three years. There was a huge gap you could drive a truck through between casual games and the triple-A games, and we just wanted to go right in the middle and get that core gameplay, but with a smaller, more focused scope. But there was just no way to do that – you couldn't put that out on any channels when we started looking at this."

That was three years ago. GarageGames had been established to facilitate the creation of games beyond the strictures and budget pressures of big publishing deals, and produced tools like the Torque engine as well as its own titles, and so it was ready for a technological challenge as well as alert to innovative modes of distribution. It took two years to realise the idea of proper, effects-heavy, polygonal game experiences inside a browser, and another to hide all that effort under an utterly unfussy, idiot-proof bonnet.

Yang joined GarageGames after his former workplace, InterAct Corporation, which owns dozens of sites – e-commerce



GarageGames' HQ in Eugene, Oregon. The university town has a reputation as the state's most 'alternative', and Sierra's 2001 closure of developer Dynamix, freeing a pool of coding talent, saw it become something of an indie-game hotspot.



Jesh Williams (left), CEO of GarageGames, and Andy Yang, general manager of web game division InstantAction

dating, travel, Ask.com – bought a majority stake in the company. Appointed InstantAction's general manager, he set about looking to the web, not games, for inspiration.

"A lot of that was inspired by what's going on now on the web for the last few years," says Yang, whose web product design past with other direct-to-consumer brands such as Sun and Ask.com has landed him a couple of Webby awards. "Content is basically a URL away, right? It started out with Flickr and then YouTube, from photosharing to videosharing. The URL has now become the main mechanism for passing content around. Why not use this knowledge that everyone already has of passing content around?"

InstantAction, Williams contends, is the perfect publishing partner to GarageGames' games and tools development departments, and the logical extension of its founders' original, 'visionary' approach. Those founders, veterans of game development who'd had enough of the pitfalls and pressures of alliances with big publishers, certainly knew how they didn't want to work. One of them, Jeff Tunnel, had also co-founded developer Dynamix in Eugene, Oregon – the state's second largest city, and its key creative and tech centre – in 1984, sold it to Sierra in 1990, and seen it wound

"THE URL HAS NOW BECOME THE MAIN MECHANISM FOR PASSING CONTENT AROUND. WHY NOT USE THIS WAY OF PASSING CONTENT AROUND FOR GAMING?"

down by subsequent parent company Vivendi Universal before its eventual closure in 2001. That closure meant that a couple of hundred game development professionals were looking for work, and that they had a couple of hundred stark reasons for wanting to work outside the standard system in future. GarageGames, and other codeshops in town, were the beneficiaries.

"I think we had some ideas of what the future would bring – certainly, the move towards digital distribution and integration of games with web technologies, which had barely begun in 1999, were trends we were counting on leveraging," says Mark Frohnmeyer, who was one of those

founders. "Still, it was mostly that, as game developers, we wanted a different publishing model that didn't exist back then – so our values and desire for a different way of making games really drove our development efforts."

A key part of the start-up's mission to make independent game creation easier was its new approach to tools. A deal was brokered with Sierra for the rights to the Tribes 2 source code that Dynamix had developed in 2001, and that became the basis of the company's low-cost, smartly-scaling 3D engine, Torque. It could be licensed for as little as \$100, and the engaged and helpful community spirit that GarageGames cultivated around the technology meant forums and friends could help others to best exploit the no-frills basic package and instructions. The technology was also distinguished by its platform-agnosticism; Linux and Mac OS incarnations followed the Windows original, just its latest iteration is also available in MS- and Nintendo-endorsed versions.

It made sense that it would win the hearts of a host of indies, but many major publishers including Sierra, NCSoft and EA have also licensed the Torque engine for retail titles. In those days, the company's message boards were usually all collaborative generosity and gratitude.

at the engine's existence and affordability, with the odd counter-argument from other aspiring developers. The fact that the company made both tools and games, the dissident voices argued, meant that its insider knowledge of the technology guaranteed them better-realised games. It also suggested that they were busy selfishly making games when they should have been updating their engine.

"Building our own games gave us a perspective on the actual use of our own tools versus a more ivory tower approach, and also proved that successful games could be made with them," Frohnmeyer says. "Being bootstrapped from the beginning



FRIENDS ROSTER

In the future, GarageGames aims to add a new title to InstantAction every month or so through in-house projects and the host of like-minded developers with which it has established relationships through the years. To that end, there are currently around 24 developers creating games for the platform, on as-yet-undisclosed titles; many are veterans of the old-fashioned way of doing it who now work to a GG-style ethos in their own small studios, and not necessarily using the Torque engine - the browser technology is compatible with a range of other tools. Some of the next wave use Unreal engine. Major publishers have also been in touch, William says, though they remain "very cautious; they don't generally make games to this model so they're not necessarily keen to change the market, but they don't want to be left too far behind."

Left: Thrust Tanks, a strategic shooter in which users play as brains piloting armoured vehicles and avoiding alien oppression. Its latest incarnation appears on InstantAction, as does Legion: Fallen Empire (below), the showpiece second-gen title.



did mean that we had to switch focus between various aspects of the overall GG mission, which meant that in the early days, if we worked on a game, engine progress would suffer. Now that GG has full teams working on each aspect from next-generation game engine technology to the web-integrated InstantAction portal, we don't have that same level of split focus, which should mean more visible progress on all fronts at the same time."


Brett Saylor, GG's VP of business development, expands on that explanation: "Effectively, we're far more focused now than we have ever been and it took our structure evolving to get there – 18 months ago we were working on the technology that powers InstantAction as a pure R&D project. Most of the company was working on Torque technology and we barely had enough resources to do any games. Since that time, we've grown significantly and we're far more balanced."

Maturity and organisation may have improved productivity, but they clearly haven't dislodged the outfit's fundamentally maverick sensibility. Frohnmeyer and his fellow founders remain at GG but, in accordance with their original pursuit of freedom, are "working on the fun stuff" – tools, games – rather than the boring business of running the company. The boss? CEO Williams joined GarageGames only four years ago – as an intern.

In those four years, the superficially simple distinction between 'casual' and 'hardcore' gaming has become an incredibly complicated one, and the pro- and anti-arguments have become increasingly reductive. To dismiss concerns about the recent deluge of Wii wagglegeware as elitist paranoia is to ignore the fact that keeping things simple and democratic doesn't preclude intense gaming experiences or skill-based controls.

"There's a tendency to oversimplify," Williams says. It's, like, sub-casual in terms of the complexity, wave your stick around. *Soul Calibur Legends*, you just waved your stick around and you could complete the game. We're about more than that, but we do agree it's about more than just good graphics. It's not just a graphics arms race, to make a good game. If you focus on that, you can make a game that looks really good without having to see the sweat on someone's eyebrow."

GarageGames' fundamentals-first approach and incremental, under-touted approach to new features are the antithesis of the high-concept hyperbole that developers tied to major publishing schedules have to engage in to compete. There's a punky Puritanism to the way Williams and Yang sidestep the fruitless



Item collection and avoidance game *Screwjumper* (right), and rolling maze hit *Marble Blast Ultra* (above) both follow XBLA iterations, while puzzle-shooter *Cyclomix* (top) is new for InstantAction.

hardcore/casual squabble to keep returning to the concept of 'core' gameplay, and to their characterisation of excesses of marquee titles as just as ridiculous as the slackness of shovelware. "We're not doing a bunch of voiceovers or cinematics," says Williams, as Yang demos the closed beta of *Fallen Empire: Legion*, a space shooter that leaps straight into familiar FPS territory by evoking not only Xbox's biggest franchise, but also functions as a kind of spiritual successor to *Tribes*. "The rendering looks nice, it looks good, right? It's everything you need to play a game, but we're not zooming in on the guy and showing his facial expressions when he gets shot or whatever stupid shit they put in triple-A games."

The first wave were largely time-efficient updates of existing GarageGames franchises: strategic vehicle combat game *Think Tanks*, the *Marble Madness/Monkey Ball*-like *Marble Blast*, space shooter *Zero Ash*, *Productivity*. By the time you read this, you will also be able to engage in WWII dogfights, violent future sports and realistic racing games via the site. *Fallen Empire* is, Williams says, its first, true second-generation InstantAction title.

The game really plays like the bastard lovechild of *Quake* meets *Tribes*," says **Tim Aste**, project manager on *Fallen Empire*. "It's a bit more fast-paced with more control, but we've been getting tons of praise from our testers on this. That aside, though, there are several factors that would feel similar. Our rocket launcher still gives that great feeling of hitting someone in mid-air, you still have a awesome sense of speed and flight. We factor in a lot of the team-play mechanics, which at the time of *Tribes* were groundbreaking, but now are a staple of pretty much any multiplayer FPS." Typically, the first task for its developers was messing

around with the basic movement model until it was certifiably "fun".

Like all the other InstantAction games, *Fallen Empire* is free to play, and will be funded by optional micropayments for such staples as extra weapons, items, dedicated servers and level packs. Its in-game features and community elements will evolve beyond that 'core' depending on what players do, and say. Yang says that the web model enables them to adapt to behaviour and remodel features with greater speed and less fuss than rivals working on the old boxed-copy model.

"If you look at how web development works, and how it's gone in the last five years," he argues, "you get something really simple out there, simple and compelling – Google's the best example, it's a search box: you type something in, you get stuff back. Started very simple, and then over time they've expanded. It's a different, low-risk philosophy, and that's what we're trying to bring to games. Start with the core and then see what the users are actually doing – we've built a lot into this."

"WITH WEB DEVELOPMENT, YOU START SIMPLE AND EXPAND OVER TIME. GOOGLE'S THE BEST EXAMPLE. THAT'S WHAT WE'RE TRYING TO BRING TO GAMES"

SPHERES OF INFLUENCE

When GarageGames put a version of its Torque-based game *Marble Blast* up on Xbox Live in spring 2006, it got more back than it bargained for. Not only was *Marble Blast Ultra* a huge hit, its presence on Live Arcade also made available to GarageGames the kind of information on users that it'd been dreaming of for years. Making user-informed changes was traditionally complicated, Williams says, "Because you don't have access to the player, you don't have access to the platform, there's no metrics. Maybe, if you're lucky, [a company] shares information with you every six months, and that's mainly just sales information." With its arrival on XBLA, GG was able to see what else those who bought it were playing – and was surprised at how hardcore its audience was. Just as useful was learning that "people who play this level of *Marble Blast* recommend this game to, like, six friends, the average being, like, three friends or whatever. So we can look at that and say, maybe we need two more levels like this, or move that level up front. Having that feedback as a developer or publisher is huge."

The company that set up to do things differently at a time when PC games were all about graphical benchmarks and a hardware upgrade every six months had seen the world come round to its approach. "I think, to a large extent, PC gaming as we know it is dying – retail triple-A gaming is really hard right now," Williams says. "But then you look at the hard facts: there are 100 million game-capable PCs around the world right now, it's just gonna take a few people figuring out how to unlock that market and put good games on it and it'll blow away the rest. It already does if you look at the world, at gaming in Asia and Korea."

As such, Williams sees other innovations in online game culture as allies in a new vanguard, rather than competitors. "I think Steam has a bright future," he says, "or something like Steam. I think there could be three, four, five services that could coexist, because they're largely replacements for retail distribution. They're just sort of cannibalising Wal-Mart or whatever, and I think that's a better way to get games. As a gamer, I'd prefer to go to Steam than to Wal-Mart. It's different from the space we're in, but we all kinda help each other. I think the idea of digitally distributing games, the more established that gets, the better for all of us."

The team has also followed the fortunes of leading contemporary Flash game portals such as Kongregate (a scene explored in "Flash Flood", E177). Again, Williams sees their achievements as a boon rather than a threat – InstantAction is theoretically compatible with Flash, but it's not a platform that naturally fits the new site's emphasis on basic gaming dexterity skills and 3D worlds. He even encourages the possibility of direct rivals on the InstantAction model, "because it would kinda help establish the concept in the general mind. We're actually surprised more people aren't doing it by now. We had the concept three years ago, and Andy started thinking about it a couple of years ago too, we figured a lot of people must be working on it, but so far it hasn't come. A good chunk of the future will be web games, so it's nice that we're still out in front."

That's the last thing you'd expect to hear from an NDA'd-up triple-A merchant with Q3 targets to hit on pain of death, and that's just the way GarageGames likes it. "What's the point of playing games, or making them, if you're under too much pressure from the corporate thumb to get any enjoyment out of it? It helps us that most people who are in games are still in it for the passion. The salaries aren't great and the hours aren't sane, even, but they make them? Oh, dude..."





ARTIFICIAL IDIOCY

Witless enemies are an oft-cited failing of videogames, but while AI designers are forever finding ways to make more formidable opponents, is smarter always better?

Pandemonium breaks out. Alarm bells sound, red warning lights flash and guards come running to the scene of the crime. Meanwhile, you, the perpetrator, slink unnoticed into some shadowy crevice. Less than a minute later, peace has been restored. Guards return to their patrols – no more aware of you now than they were before you shot one of their colleagues in broad daylight. These guys are idiots. Of course, it is the very fact that they are such short-sighted, amnesiac goons, who don't think to peer too closely into shadows or perform a systematic sweep of their surroundings, that allows the player to overcome the tremendous odds stacked against them. It makes the game possible. It also makes it a game.

Such acts of idiocy are the articles of a familiar gaming language; an understanding that the game, no matter the realism of the setting, is a system of behaviours and mechanisms that can be



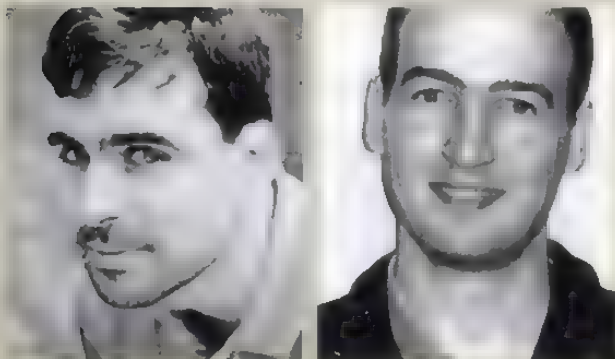
understood, predicted and exploited. The stealth genre has long made use of guards who perform their duties with strict, inevitable fallibility, leaving openings for a nimble-footed spy, thief or assassin to slip past unnoticed. For all the grim texturing of Snake's world, his opponents' behaviour conforms to a decidedly inhuman rule-set – it's hard to think that real paramilitary goons would be so enraptured by the discovery of a gentleman's magazine on the floor. The strategy genre too is reliant on such foolish enemy decisions, the beauty of *Advance Wars* comes down to the

fact that you can repeatedly exploit features of the AI – it will always pursue a cheap, unmanned vehicle with its full force, allowing you to create diversions and bore holes in its defence.

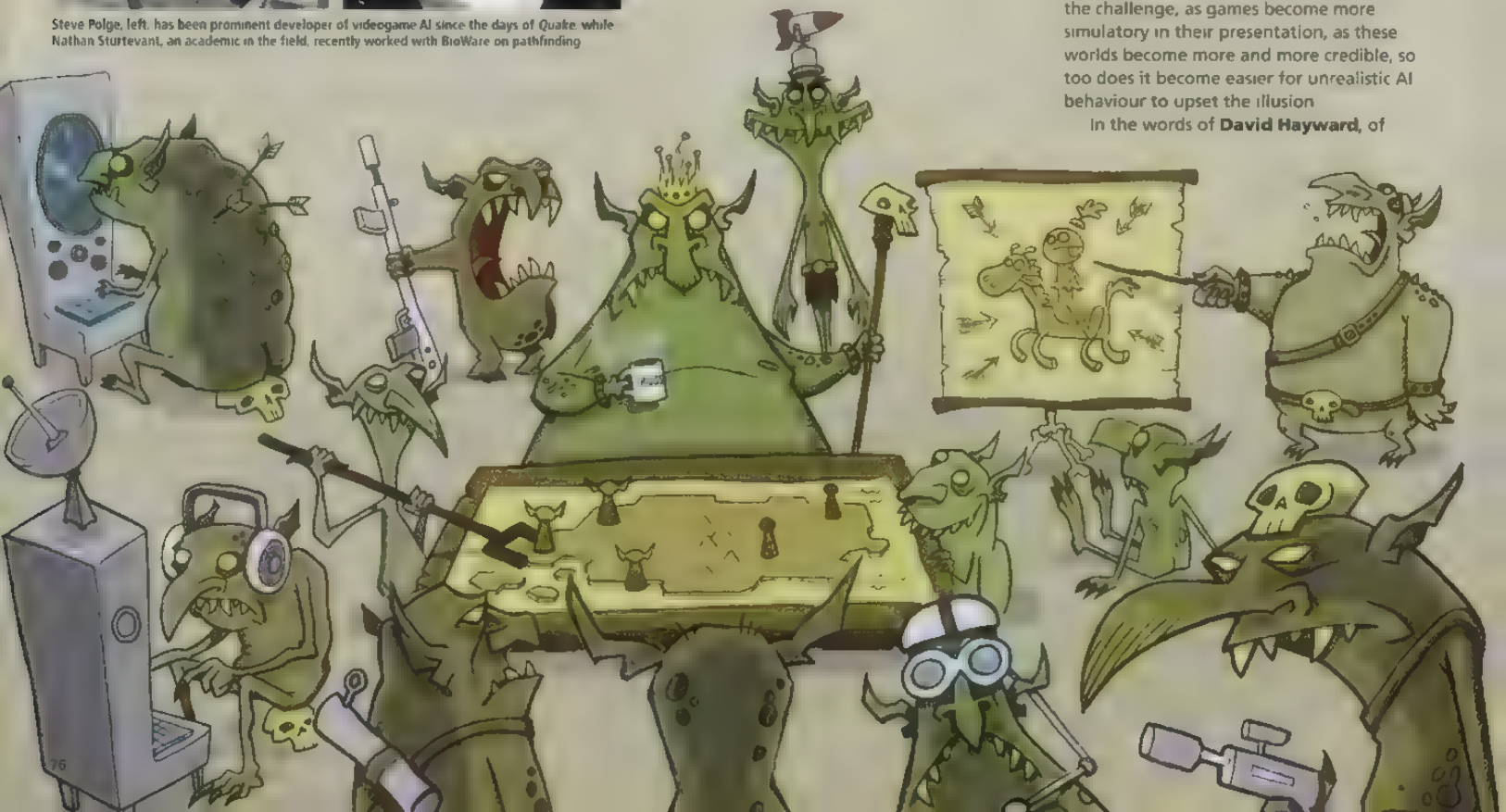
How appropriate an AI is for a game does not then run parallel to its absolute intelligence – but it's not always simply because the AI may have some design mechanic to fulfil, such as exposing tactical flaws by chasing empty APCs. "Designing an AI that takes optimal advantage of its knowledge about the game and maximises its ability to solve problems results in AI that isn't fun to play against," says Epic Games' **Steve Polge**, the man responsible for the Reaper Bot, a popular multiplayer AI made for *Quake*, and for much of the AI development on the *Unreal Tournament* series. AIs may find it difficult to react in credibly human ways, may struggle with tactical complexity, but they tend to be a pretty decent shot if their skills aren't tempered. And this has, for a long time, been the traditional approach: build a classical AI solution that maximises some measurable objective – for example, collecting the most resources, finding the shortest distance to a goal, scoring the most points – and then either dumb it down or provide it with cheats to buff it up to the appropriate level.



The problem with this approach is that, if not carefully handled, it can lead to an asymmetry between the challenges facing the AI and the player that can feel unfair – a phenomenon that is well illustrated by the evolution of the racing genre. In the past, computer-controlled vehicles ran on conveyor belts – aware of the exact racing line, following it unflinchingly, never spinning off, never crashing – except when the player powered them off the track. But in order to make them possible for the player to defeat, AIs would slow excessively at corners, so that the player could inch past them in a slightly more powerful car. However, such simplistic hobbling of the AIs' abilities is increasingly untenable, whether it is done to fit in with a design mechanic or in order to adjust the challenge, as games become more simulatory in their presentation, as these worlds become more and more credible, so too does it become easier for unrealistic AI behaviour to upset the illusion. In the words of **David Hayward**, of



Steve Polge, left, has been prominent developer of videogame AI since the days of *Quake* while Nathan Sturtevant, an academic in the field, recently worked with BioWare on pathfinding.





MotorStorm's AI opponents were designed to entertain the player as much as they were meant to present a challenge – ploughing into each other to create spectacular crashes

videogame consultancy Pixel-Lab, "The closer a representation of a human is to reality, the slighter the flaws that can suddenly de-animate it." It's the uncanny valley phenomenon, whereby the closer approximations of humanity become more unsettlingly inhuman than those resting in abstraction, and it applies to more than just the fidelity with which human bodies are rendered – if the context in which an AI exists is realistic, but its behaviour conforms to abstracted ideas of gameplay, then the result can be jarring.

Clearly, when designers dumb down an AI they now need to be smarter about the way they make it stupid. For a game like *Unreal Tournament 3*, in which the AI opponents must act as much like human



multiplayer opponents as possible, this is particularly important

"We spent more time working on limiting AI capabilities in human-like ways, such as aiming accuracy or world-state knowledge, than any other AI problem," says Polge. "Before *UT3*, the approach we used was to determine the factors that made human players more or less likely to hit a target – like whether the target was stationary or moving, whether its movement

was erratic, whether the shooter had just been knocked around by a shot, whether the shooter was stationary or moving – and use these factors to modify the magnitude of the random aiming error. This approach worked reasonably well in terms of mimicking how frequently a target should be hit, but it broke down in a couple of ways. The first was that at some extremes, such as [when the target was] very close or very far away, this accuracy model wasn't as realistic. The second was that bots would miss as frequently as a human, but not in the same way. For example, when a player suddenly dodges to the side, other humans tend to miss by shooting where the player used to be going, rather than with a large spread around where the player is currently going

significantly in *UT3* by adding reaction time to the bot's model of where a player is going. Rather than extrapolating where a player will be when the projectile reaches their location based on the player's current location and velocity, bots extrapolate their enemy's position based on what they were doing a few hundred milliseconds ago – which is what humans do. This results in bot aiming 'feeling' much more human-like."

Similar solutions have been developed to deal with the uncanny skill set of opponents in racing games. 'Rubber-banding' has been one way of addressing the issue of creating a consistently surmountable challenge, causing AI drivers to adjust their driving capabilities, or even achieve impossible speeds, in order to tax you regardless of how well or how poorly you are driving. This too has proved unconvincing at times, with considerable leads being improbably reduced in seconds and vice versa

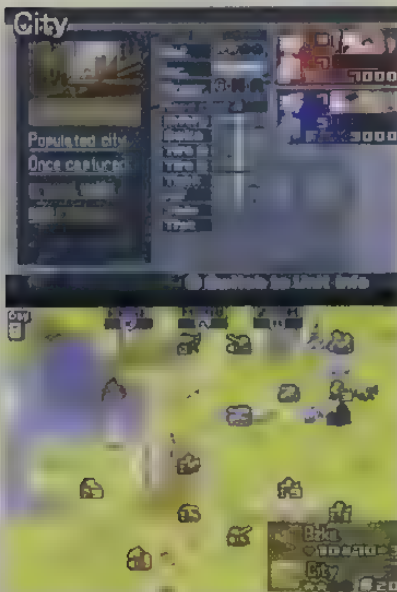
"Rubber-banding is an interesting art-form," says **Hamish Young**, a producer at Criterion who has worked on every *Burnout* game. "Essentially there are some cars in the pack you want to be around however badly the player plays, to encourage them to get



Stealth games, such as the *Splinter Cell* series, well illustrate how heavily dependent game design is on inhuman AI behaviour



"THE CLOSER A REPRESENTATION OF A HUMAN IS TO REALITY, THE SLIGHTER THE FLAWS THAT CAN SUDDENLY DE-ANIMATE IT"



The *Advance Wars* series is predicated on highly predictable AI behaviour which allows you to consistently exploit its errors. While they aren't errors a sensible human would make, is that really something important at this level of abstraction?

was erratic, whether the shooter had just been knocked around by a shot, whether the shooter was stationary or moving – and use these factors to modify the magnitude of the random aiming error. This approach worked reasonably well in terms of mimicking how frequently a target should be hit, but it broke down in a couple of ways. The first was that at some extremes, such as [when the target was] very close or very far away, this accuracy model wasn't as realistic. The second was that bots would miss as frequently as a human, but not in the same way. For example, when a player suddenly dodges to the side, other humans tend to miss by shooting where the player used to be going, rather than with a large spread around where the player is currently going

"We improved the aiming model



The AI in the *Metal Gear* series has gradually incorporated more and more human behaviours, such as radioing for back-up, but has yet to transcend all of its abstracted game mechanics

back into the race. These are the back-markers. Then there are a group of cars in the middle who stretch between the back-markers and the pacemakers. The pacemakers are the front couple of cars and they in effect set the difficulty of a race. Over the course of the different *Burnouts* we have added more and more cars to the races, which means the rubber-banding can be more subtly spread across the pack."

Burnout's emphasis on battling with other vehicles and forcing them from the road allows for more variables by which the abilities of the AI can be reduced or increased – disguising the degree with which this is contrived to match player skill

"I think in general in the genre you either get cars that drive almost impossibly well and often they ignore that you exist,"

says Young. "In *Burnout*, neither cliché is true. We try to make our AI behave in a human way mainly by trying to get them to only make the same mistakes a human would. For *Burnout*, this would be things like mispredicting where a piece of cross-traffic will be and crashing into it. The reasons for misprediction are mostly similar to what a human experiences: there is a degree of guessing where the traffic will be and when you could potentially contact it. Causing AI to crash is relatively easy because you can directly play with its perception – for example, make it ignore a piece of traffic, make it think a corner is wider than it is, etc. Ultimately, it requires understanding the mistakes humans make and why their judgements are off and then building a system whose judgements can be similarly off"

MotorStorm is also an interesting example for this – it shares *Burnout's* love of cinematic vehicle carnage, often using its AI to contrive collisions directly in the player's view. However, it also attempts to personify your opponents in ways that allow you to appreciate precisely what the AI is attempting and why. Offensive gesticulations are one of the more brazen examples of how the AI states its aggression towards another racer. Drive up behind a motorcycle in a heavy vehicle, however, and it will look over its shoulder, its appearance

MUCH ADD ABOUT CODING

...the AI is planning or attempting, users will be frustrated. If the AI is too strong, it will probably be perceived as cheating, and if it is too weak, it will be perceived as stupid. In *FEAR*, if the AI couldn't get in through a door, it would try a window. This makes the enemy more predictable, and when I can predict what the enemy is going to do, I can both appreciate its intelligence and begin to defeat it. I may have the most intelligent AI system in the world, but if there is no way for a player to perceive what the AI is trying to do, it will end up looking stupid."



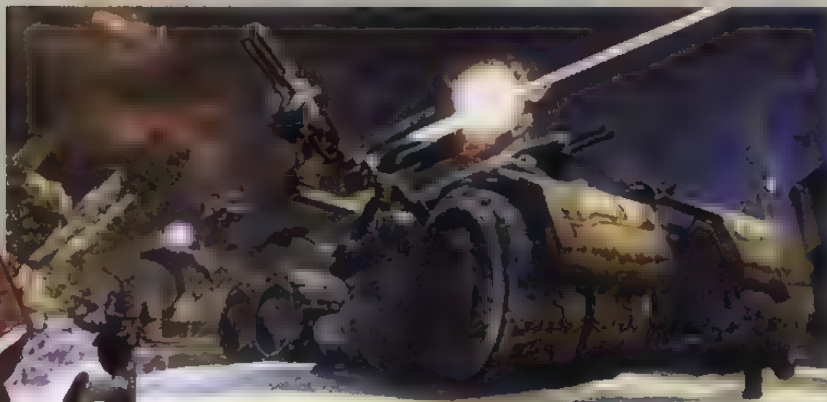
UNREAL TOURNAMENT'S AI POSES A DIFFERENT DEVELOPMENT CHALLENGE TO MOST SINGLEPLAYER AI: IT MUST DO EVERYTHING A HUMAN PLAYER CAN

of nervousness signalling that it is now more likely to make a mistake and crash

"One of the most important things required to write a good AI for any game is to make sure that there is some way for users to know what the AI is trying to do," says **Nathan Sturtevant**, creator of '90s tank game *Dome Wars* and now a PhD lecturer in AI at the University of Alberta.

"If the user has no ability to perceive what the AI is planning or attempting, users will be frustrated. If the AI is too strong, it will probably be perceived as cheating, and if it is too weak, it will be perceived as stupid. In *FEAR*, if the AI couldn't get in through a door, it would try a window. This makes the enemy more predictable, and when I can predict what the enemy is going to do, I can both appreciate its intelligence and begin to defeat it. I may have the most intelligent AI system in the world, but if there is no way for a player to perceive what the AI is trying to do, it will end up looking stupid."

A large part of this is consistency – in fact when we complain about stupid AI, and toss the controller across the floor in disgust, we are more often than not referring to anomalies in its behaviour rather than an actual lack of intelligence. When an eagle-eyed enemy improbably spots you while you believe yourself to be adequately hidden, or



Unreal Tournament's AI poses a different development challenge to most singleplayer AI: it must do everything a human player can





"[Burnout Paradise's] AI pretty much does no learning," reveals Young. "We use a combination of heuristics which has the advantage that the behaviour is predictable, controllable and deterministic, yet through emergent behaviour can also be complex and human"

when opponents manage to track you down with the insistence of a psychic beagle - these are the things that jar with the player's understanding of the world and drag him or her out of it.

"I think pathfinding is an area that used to cause designers a lot of problems," says Sturtevant. "If your henchman got stuck in *Neverwinter Nights* or even just fell too far behind, he would just teleport to catch up. I worked on the pathfinding system for *Dragon Age*, and I hope and expect that there won't be such a problem there. Last year I got to hear Quinn Dunki [senior AI programmer at Pandemic Studios] talk about the pathfinding design in *Saboteur*, and they have a variety of animations they will play when an AI gets stuck, culminating with one of angry frustration. If your AI does get stuck, the human player will probably be much more forgiving if they can see that the AI knows it's stuck."

With inconsistent or inscrutable

behaviour currently anathema, it seems like current design paradigms naturally limit the kind of dynamism you can squeeze from an AI. As Polge says, "AI NPCs are still not as innovative as human players. Improving in this area, with the goal of really surprising players without frustrating them, is challenging, and less straightforward than the improvements we've made so far."

In fact, rather than seeing future AI research feed into the genres of today, Young foresees that it will add an entirely new branch to the games that get made: "Games generally are better if the game designer can shape and direct the experience. Many of these research directions are therefore tangential to requirements of games for now. My view is that new types of AI will ultimately lead to new types of game rather than games using more and more of the research piecemeal."

Polge throws out one suggestion of how emerging AI research might shape game design: "A game with a solid implementation of a robust speech recognition and synthesis system as an interface, and a compelling personality and motivation model for NPCs could have



Manhunt is unusual among stealth games. Enemies stray from preset paths and lie about whether they can see you or not

gameplay focused on determining the motivations of allies and opponents."

Even then, credible stupidity will be key to emulating human interaction. The Turing Test, which demands that an AI must be indistinguishable from a human in conversation, isn't simply a matter of increasing an AI's knowledge. It will only be passed when an AI can intuit questions a human would answer, such as 'What colour is grass?' and which they would not, such as 'What is the square root of Pi?' It seems like an AI's stupidity might prove to be the cleverest thing about it.



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Review

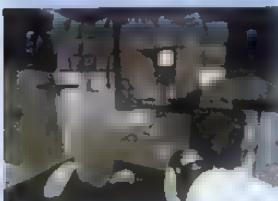
Edge's most played

Grand Theft Auto IV



It really is an Effortless Cool Simulator as much as it is a game. Those towering gothic structures make the balletic combat feel all the more awesome – and us too. 360, PS3, CAPCOM

Portal



The song may not have got to number one last Christmas, but it's still rattling around our heads. The cake jokes have long since worn themselves thin, however. 360, PC, PS3, EA, VALVE

Wii Fit



Will a cunning 'gaming up' of exercise turn chore into fun, or will it end up in the garage with the barbecue, bread maker and other detritus of middle-class boredom? WII, NINTENDO

That's just how we roll The thin line between qualms and quirks




GTA IV has frustrations, sure, but they are the frustrations the series has always had: we've come to expect them in a GTA game. But does that make them easier, or harder, to forgive?

San Andreas was the worst for it. *GTAIII*, just settled for making you pick up the odd package here or take out the odd fellow there. *Vice City* piled on extra errands, and by the time *San Andreas* got to its climax, missions might involve an elaborate heist, a series of gun battles, jetpack rides and a helicopter getaway all within one gruelling 20-minute escapade, lamentably lacking in checkpoints.

As we sat down for the first time in front of *GTAIV* we were braced for an onslaught of elaborate missions, well aware that we'd probably end up loving the game in spite of them.

However, Rockstar has avoided escalating the missions to another level of convolution, suggesting that it is certainly aware this was an occasionally infuriating design decision. And it's true that *GTAIV* makes concessions in the combat system, adding the ability to take cover, blindfire and so on. Rockstar has even acknowledged that *Saints Row* had at least one decent idea to bring to the table: its dynamic route guidance. And yet some hallmark oddities of the series still remain. There's the tendency to make you drive a few miles before a mission begins in earnest –

a slight irritation partly mitigated by the fact that dialogue between Niko and his accomplices during the journey changes on replay. There are still the occasional difficulty spikes, with certain missions leaving you burying your head in your hands.

But so it has always been with *GTA* – and *GTA* has always been brilliant, regardless. When discussing our experiences with the game, every time a criticism was offered, someone would shrug and say "Well, that's *GTA*, you know?" Could we really expect or want anything different? In a game of such vast ambition, offering up this much content, certain elements are guaranteed to hit duff notes. But shouldn't we celebrate it for all of the things that it succeeds in getting so dazzlingly right? And this *GTA* does get it right. The series has always been informed by an unapologetic vision. If it has finally welcomed the influence of others with its cover system or sat-nav, then these are dwarfed by the brilliance of its world-building and vivacious characters – and these are innovations all of its own. For all its idiosyncrasies and minor blemishes, in the end you have to accept that's just how it rolls. 



Grand Theft Auto IV
PS3, 360



86 Final Fantasy VII: Crisis Core
PSP



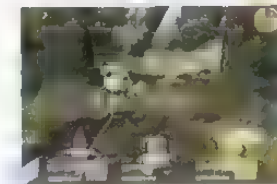
88 Gran Turismo 5 Prologue
PS3

89 Echochrome
PS3, PSP

90 Penny Arcade Adventures
PC



92 Ninja Gaiden: Dragon Sword
DS



93 Opoona
DS

95 Bangai-O Spirits
DS

95 Assassin's Creed: Alair's Chronicles
DS

96 Soul Nomad
PS2

96 RedLynx Trials 2: Second Edition
PC



GRAND THEFT AUTO IV

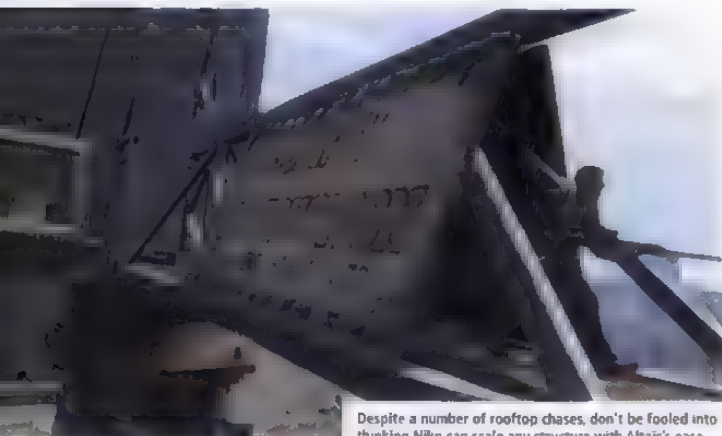
FORMAT: PC, PS3, XBOX360
PUBLISHER: ROCKSTAR DEVELOPER: ROCKSTAR NORTH
PREVIOUSLY IN: E177, E187, E199



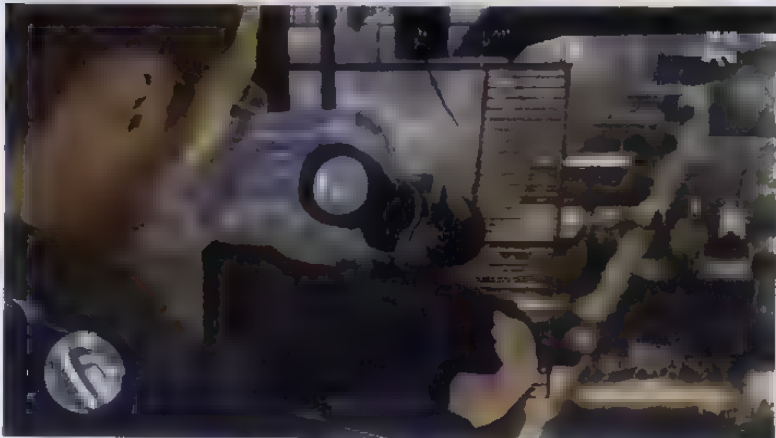
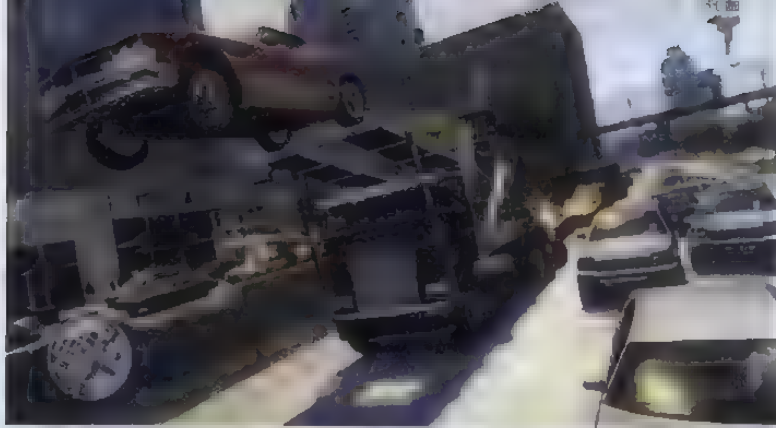
You really appreciate the scale of Rockstar's endeavour from on high. The quantity of detail that's been worked into the environments becomes evident when looking down on the city; it's hard to resist just watching the world go by.

As you drive around Liberty City, flipping between radio stations, absorbing the inanity of their commercial messages and the bilious hypocrisy of their small-minded politics, you realise that the America of *GTAIV* is a country coming down from its trip. The humour – some crass, some clever – errs towards the absurd, as the series has always done, but never before has it been so cutting, so impassioned or so relevant. Filtered through the world-weary eyes of Eastern Bloc immigrant Niko Bellic, the American Dream is all string-out, sapped dry from the coke-fueled megalomania of the '80s, paying in full for the arrogance of its '90s empire-building – and what little remains is at the mercy of relentless subdivision, as everyone tries to carve off a little piece for themselves. Even the criminal organisations familiar to previous *GTA*s are at the end of their game: fractious, desperate and doomed. It's unforbearing stuff – an evisceration of America's insularity, its gluttony, its petty suburban misery, its lethargy and artificiality. As funny as *GTAIV* is, this really is laughter in the dark –

Your interactions flesh out Niko in a way which makes him the most sympathetic and well-drawn *GTA* protagonist yet



Despite a number of rooftop chases, don't be fooled into thinking Niko can scale any structure with Altair's ease.



Some missions catch you unawares with the level of preparation that's required. For one thing, you can never be sure that things will go to plan; simple robberies can escalate into gunfights in short order. Weather and the time of day can also make a big difference to certain objectives – the mission depicted above, for example, is a lot tougher on a foggy night.

brilliantly observed, unnerving and bitter.

This may seem a bit heavy for a *GTA* game. It's after all a series which delights in toying you up for celebratory moments of carnage. No player of the previous games will be unfamiliar with the experience of standing on a rooftop, gleefully taking down police choppers with a bazooka as support teams screech to a halt down below. Other games have since pared down the genre that *GTA* first created into entertaining contractions – sandboxes which exist solely for the joy of their restriction. It is probably *GTAIV*'s greatest achievement that it eases the player from this mindset. Yes, there's still the freedom to cause havoc, and inevitably you do. The difference is that you're no longer impeded to toy with *GTAIV*'s world in quite the same madistic way – you live in it.

This adjustment of tone sees the eradication of the more frivolous, preposterous elements of *GTA*s past. There are no jetpacks this time around, clothing remains within credible limitations, and helicopters are the most outlandish things you will commandeer. There are no hidden packages, the jumps are fewer and less conspicuous. *GTAIV* manages to coax you away from casual mayhem by loading you with more meaningful commitments – simultaneously stepping away from and surpassing the kind of peripheral distractions that were to be found in *San Andreas*. You develop and maintain relationships with

other characters, phoning them on your mobile to arrange hook-ups. The kinds of things you can do with them – going bowling, drinking, playing pool or darts, visiting comedy or cabaret or strip clubs while breaking up and pulling you away from the main missions, feel no less significant to the overall story. These aren't diversions but ancillary features of Niko's life, just as critical a part of the experience as anything else.

Certainly the minigames are competent enough, and the various clubs are mad experiences best left to the player's own discovery – the kind of thing that only Rockstar would be ballsy enough to attempt. But the real motivation for spending time with your friends is that they make a significant contribution to the texture of the world. Their esteem for you isn't just a percentile measurement which, upon growth, unlocks extra game modes and side missions, your interactions flesh out and explain Niko's character in a way that makes him the most sympathetic and well-drawn *GTA* protagonist yet – as well as perhaps the most tragic and nihilistic. Tommy Vercetti was a wise-cracking mafioso cipher, more an aggregation of sharp gangster caricatures than a fulsome and believable character. *San Andreas* was a more credible figure, but the fact that he was a likeable chump stood at odds with the player's sociopathic control over his behaviour. Through encounters with friends



and girlfriends, *GTAIV* tackles this disconnect head on, revealing that the contradiction is in Niko himself – a man troubled by his own bleak world-view, traumatized by his experience of the Baltic conflict. With his humanity whittled down, Niko arrives in Liberty City looking for revenge, but you don't have to spend long in his company to hope he finds redemption instead.

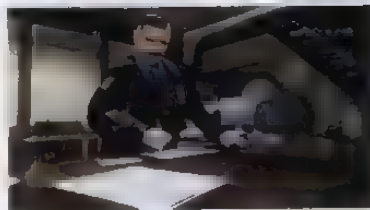
The writing makes a mark not only in quality but in quantity: missions have multiple dialogue options so that you don't have to listen to the same lines on each replay, and even the *GTA* tradition of barking pedestrians throws up few repetitions. The escalation of world detail over previous *GTA* games is phenomenal. Now you can go to internet cafes, swap emails and look up Liberty City's various institutions and businesses on the web. A police computer now lists current crimes and has a searchable record of their perpetrators. The radio stations discuss your deeds. Such stuff is perhaps trivial in isolation, but in aggregation creates an unrivalled sense of a living city.

Of tangential benefit to this is the increased sense of physicality – car impacts feel really weighty, be it with another vehicle or a pedestrian's head, and combat has real heft too, both armed and unarmed. The new *Rainbow Six* Vegas-style cover system is certainly an improvement over predecessors but lacks that game's level of refinement.

occasionally clunking as you stick to the wrong walls. Enemies rarely attempt to flank you at all, unless scripted to do so. Nonetheless, your fragility under fire means positioning is important, and gunfights are now methodical, tense affairs in which you creep from cover to cover, picking off the threats with careful headshots, breaking the enemy's suppressing fire with a well-placed grenade. It's a shame, however, that Niko's climbing ability isn't used more in the missions to extend the number of approaches to a particular objective.

In fact, the one area where Rockstar has done little to radicalise or evolve is in the

Continued



Although *GTAIV* isn't visually untouchable, its atmospheric effects – both visual and aural – are often simply stunning. The way wet pavement reflects city lights is a splendid touch.

Safe position



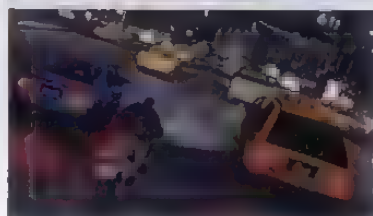
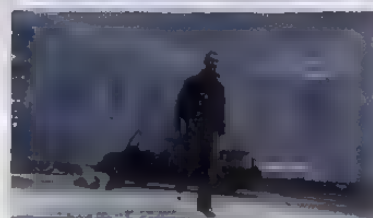
The mirror to Niko's nihilism is his cousin Roman – a loveable optimist, prolific bullshitter, spendthrift and incompetent, who is no less human for his frequent employment as comic relief. His arrival in Liberty City is fuelled by the clichéd dream of American opportunity, which somehow fails to shatter on impact with the hard reality. Niko, meanwhile, maintains that there are no new beginnings, just more baggage with every restart. The struggle between these two voices makes for an unexpected and powerful tract, and is compounded by the surrounding cast of tragic and comic characters – all deluded that their terrible actions are a necessary means to a morally agreeable end.



Bored of driving? You can hop in a taxi for a small fee and choose to skip to your destination or stare out the window.



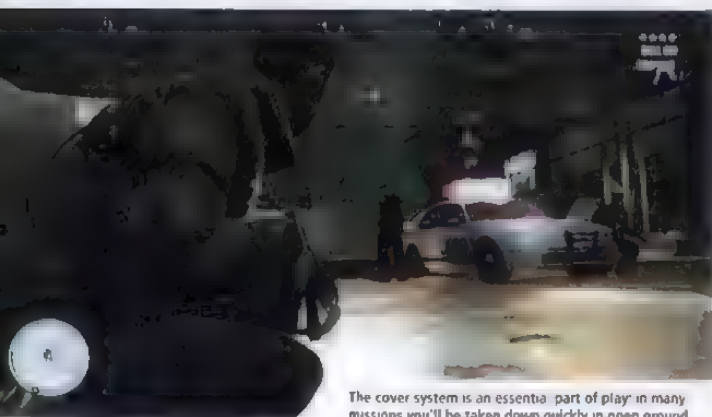
The weapons feel a good deal more lethal in this version of GTA, both when in your hands and in those of your enemies. You can go into an over-the-shoulder view by holding down the left trigger - pull it halfway down to enter free-aiming mode, and all the way down to lock on to the nearest target. A single bullet to the head will then take down most targets.



mission structure. With the exception that you can now instantly restart a mission from the place where you picked it up, this is dirty business as usual. Some novel objectives and minor, but nonetheless satisfying, puzzles smatter the welcome familiarity of assassinations, chases, hold-ups and deliveries. For the larger part, GTA IV goes

back to basics, avoiding the overcomplicated multi-part missions of San Andreas, but there still remain a small few of those hallmark GTA design decisions which have you rattling the air with profanities: tricky, lengthy missions with a compulsory drive from one island to another before things kick off, often crossing Liberty City's narrow, busy bridges, through toll gates and sluggish traffic.

These are the most cartoonish GTA vehicles yet, with reluctant cornering and a tendency to fup end over end.



The cover system is an essential part of play in many missions; you'll be taken down quickly in open ground.

If these slightly punitive distances can be excused as a quirk of the series, there are other things that occasionally jar. Certain missions require you to chase and eliminate enemies, but you frequently suspect after loading up upon a heap of bullets that an motorcycle stunt that he is in fact inevitable, conducting you through a near-visually-scripted chase sequence before you're allowed to kill him. The invulnerability and subsequent abrupt lack of this never grips and feels like a low blow, but this is just a misstep in the vastness of GTAIV. Closer inspection of Rockstar's sprawling creation inevitably throws up minor flaws, very occasionally making a phone call renders you unable to run or enter vehicles - an unfortunate circumstance to be in when under heavy fire from the local constabulary. Sometimes your car will mysteriously evaporate following a cutscene

or a restart. And an odd bug in our review code caused traffic in the narrow dual carriageways to veer into one another in a madly synchronised suicidal swerve. In other words, GTAIV isn't without blemishes but, like the texture pop-in and other slight imperfections, they look insignificant in the context of the game's insane scale. GTAIV's ambition dictates that it could never have been without flaws, and, at the same time, that such flaws are instantly diminished.

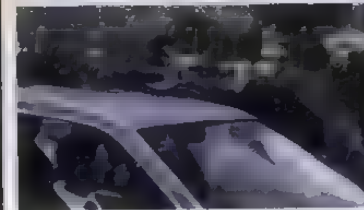
Something that may be more divisive is the driving mode. In contrast to the added grit in nearly every other area of the game (these are the splashiest, most cartoonish vehicles of a GTA game yet, with over-excitabile suspensions, reluctant cornering and a tendency to fup end over end if you tap a kerrt at any speed), if you come to the game fresh from the streets of *Burnout Paradise*, you can be forgiven for being frustrated that the car handling becomes a blast once



Breaking into cars is very slightly more involved than in previous GTA games – now you smash in the windows with a boot, elbow or bullet. Once inside, you can rapidly tap the triggers to get Niko to hotwire the ignition faster



Motorbikes are the best way to slip through traffic on the toll roads, and are among the few vehicles that can corner tightly. Despite being surprisingly stable in GTAIV, two wheels can often lead to lethal accidents

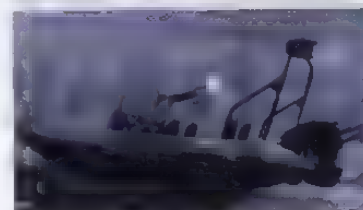
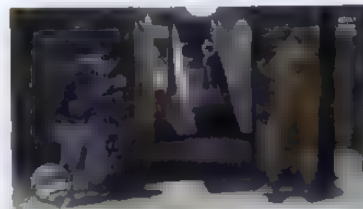


Now, when you drag people from a car, you'll get a number of possible animations, and the hapless evictee may attempt to put up a struggle. Point a gun at their head and they tend to comply pretty quickly, however

mastered, making the fraught chases a matter of control rather than speed. Rockstar has gone for *The Blues Brothers* over *The Fast And The Furious* and, after a few inadvertent doughnuts, it's a decision you come to admire. Also contributing to the pleasure of police pursuit is the new Wanted system. A cone on your mini-map now determines an area of alertness that you must escape. Cops appear on your radar weaving their way towards the centre, since being spotted by them reduces the cone on you. Evasion becomes a little like a game of *Pac-Man*, forcing the player to dart down back alleys in order to shake the heat.

GTAIV undoubtedly represents a progression for the series, not just about every way – some achievements are coming off the back of something as ambitious as *San Andreas* – in some ways it simply furthers the formula, but by drawing a world of unmatched depth and interest, it has

managed to transcend the clichés of the genre Rockstar first created. But while it's bold enough to move away from the show-biz thrills of ever bigger explosions, it elects not to radically rethink some of the more idiosyncratic elements of its predecessors, leaving some edges a little rough, and surprises you with the occasional cheap trick. Ultimately, these things matter little, not simply because the amount of content is so staggeringly diverse that occasional failures can be immediately forgiven, but because its cast of brilliantly drawn characters lure you into a greater engagement than ever before. The fun factor, at least, is the same as before, and some of the nuts and bolts feel a little loose, but in this world, it's not only what you do, there are few other games so constantly engaging or entertaining, and it may be a pain-taking time before anything else matches up to its breadth of vision. [10]



As with previous games, the bridges to the other islands are initially closed. In *GTAIV* the pretext is that the city is on high alert following a terrorist threat. You can get to them by boat, but be warned: you'll get an instant six-star Wanted level. Of course, that may be just the thing you're looking for when you first start up the game

The thin blue online



Multiplayer is accessed via your phone at any point in the game, although, unlike *Burnout Paradise*, it doesn't drop players directly into your world, but whisks you off to a lobby. There are a fair few game modes and a good deal of customisation available for each. However, deathmatch and race modes will be of brief interest next to VIP-variant *Cops 'n' Crooks* and *Team Mafiya Works*, whereby competing teams attempt to achieve a sequence of criminal objectives before the other – picking up stashes, stealing trucks and assassinating targets – in order to gain the favour of the Russian mob.



FINAL FANTASY VII CRISIS CORE

FORMAT: PSP RELEASE: OUT NOW (JAPAN, U.S., JULY (UK))
PUBLISHER: SQUARE ENIX DEVELOPER: BH-HOUSE



The X button handles most of the offensive actions in fighting, and cycling through your options is handled via the shoulder buttons. Combined with the dodge and block commands, it proves to be an excellent and intuitive interface

So, *Final Fantasy VII: Final Fantasy VII*. A game that has since release, amassed a following and an aura of reverence of which no comparable title can boast. *Final Fantasy VII*. If this issue of *Edge* came with those words as a coverline, it would probably sell seven times as many copies. *Final Fantasy VII: Crisis Core*. It's a winner, no

Because of this, any attempt to evaluate *Crisis Core* faces a problem. The game is destined to receive praise from one sizeable sector of the gaming public, overlooked to see the return of Cloud and co in a full-scale

Crisis Core fundamentally depends on the player having digested and loved FFVII, its entire being predicated on prior knowledge

setting. Conversely, another sector will be keen to show that they haven't jumped on the bandwagon and remain immune to the hype, criticising problems that only come to the fore when you're not steeped in the game's lore. It's not simply a matter of perspective. *Crisis Core* fundamentally depends on the player having digested and



The materia fusion tool lets Zack play around with increasingly complex combinations of materia and items to create rarer magics, and is an enjoyable enough diversion – though hardly on a par with FFVII's memorable materia system

oved *FFVII*; its entire being is predicated on prior knowledge. And that's not something to be dismissed or even considered lightly.

For the game's design, it means several interconnected factors: there are characters and items that must recur, there are locations that must be used, there are certain materia and summons that must play out, there are Square Enix conventions for cutscenes, there are expectations for how the story will develop. In this context, it's a minor miracle that *Crisis Core* not only achieves a good level of quality, but manages to innovate at all within this template. While it's not wholly

successful in this respect, it's inventive enough to be genuinely surprising.

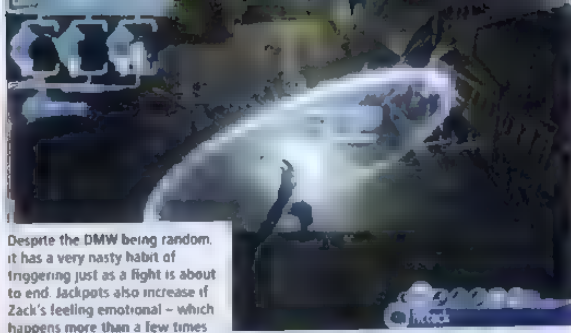
First, it strips away the pretence of a free-roaming world, focusing instead on a tightly plotted central storyline that moves from environment to environment without any tiresome traveling and only a few re-used locations. Side-missions are found in the form of smaller battles accessible through any save point in the game (with more unlocked as more are completed), and serve as the route to most of the rare items and materia that you'll acquire – as well as an option that makes leveling, on the rare occasions it's required, less of a chore.

On that note, the leveling in *Crisis Core* works with something called the Digital Mind Wave, rather than the infinite stat grind of most RPGs. The DMW system is a slot machine, featuring both characters and numbers, that rotates during battle and confers benefits on Zack, regularly coming up with temporary boosts, such as increasing your physical resistance or nulling MP cost, to be incorporated into your strategy on the fly. Every so often, characters or numbers align in a particular sequence that will either level up Zack or his materia, or trigger a special attack. Zack will jump up a few levels in quick succession on more than one occasion during the game, and materia are quickly mastered if rotated in their slots, so a full complement of powered-up magic powers can be yours in short order. And so *Crisis Core* manages to incorporate the traditions of leveling and magic in such a manner that they can be treated as

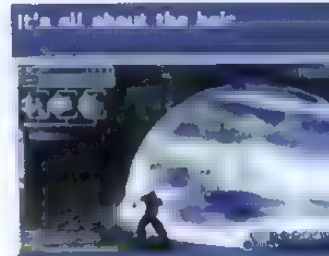
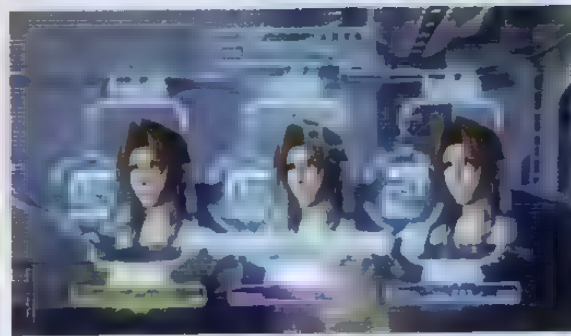


Oddly, the story of the Buster sword and how it came into Cloud's hands is almost touching. But for fewer maniacal 'mwa ha ha' moments and unexplained attacks from key players, it could have been beautiful





Despite the DMW being random, it has a very nasty habit of triggering just as a fight is about to end. Jackpots also increase if Zack's feeling emotional - which happens more than a few times



It's all about the hair

Zack was a minor character in the original, but important in several respects: he was Aerith's boyfriend, and Cloud believed he was Zack for a time, adopting his personality traits and arguably imitating physical characteristics. A good portion of *Crisis Core's* narrative is given over to retconning such things into its own narrative, and there's mixed success. Zack is a surprisingly likeable lead, and his involvement with Cloud becomes quite affecting after a slightly creaky start. But other characters, in particular Angeal, act as little more than a deus ex machina, literally descending from the sky at certain moments to trigger a cutscene or a boss battle.



All of the Square Enix cameos you might expect appear throughout the game, some oblique and some blatant, but the appearance of a young Yuffie (replete with updates of her original PS1 animations) is a particular highlight



background noise rather than an essential component of progress

The battle system itself is both the bravest and the most flawed innovation. It's brilliant at moments and numbingly dull at others, a mechanic with great potential that doesn't quite balance out challenge. This is primarily because weaker enemies simply can't deal with Zack's power and relentless attacks falling easily to the unstoppable X button, while later bosses muster up ridiculous unblockable/un Dodgeable attacks that take huge chunks of health and frequently result in frustrating losses. Another divisive element arrives in the form of special attacks, triggered when the DMW lines up a particular character, while they're useful and presented in a stylish manner, their occurrence is random and you can't select between them. Coming up with Aerith's healing magic when your health is at its maximum and there are four monsters breathing down your neck isn't a great design and neither is feeling that you've beaten a boss via the process of some lucky rolls.

The design of the locations and

particularly the battle missions all too often strays into the uninspired, quite an achievement given the rich world of the PlayStation original. More disappointingly, some missions are uninspired in themselves. Fancy a stealth section in an RPG featuring random encounters? Thought not.

So there are lots of little niggles here, but in the context of a lavishly presented and occasionally beautifully written game, *Crisis Core* gets arguably the most important thing right: its story is often expertly engineered and delivered, and despite the odd misstep, *Genesis* becomes especially tiresome as the game wears on) is some achievement in itself. And the ending? Enough to bring any canon funder to their knees.

For this, any serious fan of the original has to regard *Crisis Core* as just about essential. Besides that, it's not a game that lives entirely off its association: in fact, the only really interesting thing about *Crisis Core* is that by trying so much, and routinely only failing by the slimmest of margins, it shows that it could have been so much more than simply "for the fans". [6]



Probably the most important battlefield tactic is to manoeuvre behind your opponents, ensuring every hit that lands is a critical one - your blows can also strike more than one foe at a time, so huge fights can be over pretty quickly with good positioning (and, as with everything, liberal use of the X button)



There's no overworld per se; travel is handled automatically after Zack is provided with assignments or decides to shoot off on his own - but the selectable missions always allow you to revisit places



GRAN TURISMO 5 PROLOGUE

FORMAT: PS3 RELEASE: OUT NOW PUBLISHER: SCEI DEVELOPER: POLYPHONY DIGITAL PREVIOUSLY IN: ECTS



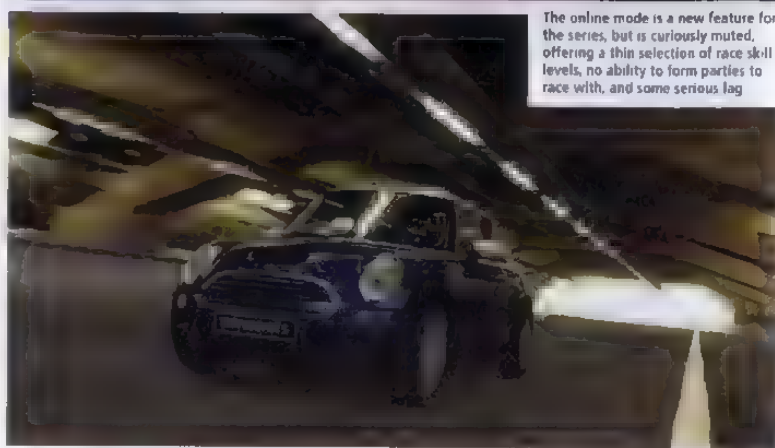
Killer looks

Prologue often looks startlingly realistic. Roads are resplendent with cracks and markings, lighting in the form of bloom and HDR is beautifully subtle, car interiors are detailed, and reflections don't only appear on your own car but competitors', too. And all this at 60fps. But any framerate drops or glitches are equally apparent. The first corner at Suzuka, as cars become bunched at the start of the race, can bring about very slight slowdown, in-car views are particularly prone to small amounts of screen tearing, dust thrown up from grass features strange vertical banding, and, overall, aliasing is heavy. It sounds like nit-picking, but this is a series that has always put pristine graphics at the fore

Game director Kazunori Yamauchi is laughing in a way like your Gran Turismo games. "We were trying to enable sports driving, not just the steering wheel and the brake pedals, so anyone can have that type of fun, with confidence," says a member of the design team behind the Mitsubishi Lancer Evolut on X, confirming that game and reality are merging. The interview is on one of Gran Turismo TV's downloadable documentaries. HD variations of the series esteem for the automobile.

And with *Prologue's* smooth front end they've never been presented so well. Every lustrous curve is even more lovingly shaped than before, and now they're framed by picturesque taian ruins, a Japanese manor house, and the timber-framed houses of the German town where Gottlieb Daimler was born, the camera softly panning around. The menus fade in and out with mesmerising slowness as GT's peculiar brand of jazz plays, everything is utterly polished. Attention, too, has been paid to navigation—selection of cars is now through a pop-up menu on the main screen rather than a new screen that requires loading.

It all serves to generate that special magic that *Gran Turismo* has always been so good at casting, a magic that makes gear ratios deeply compelling. By the time you've bought your first car, a transaction marked



The online mode is a new feature for the series, but is curiously muted, offering a thin selection of race skill levels, no ability to form parties to race with, and some serious lag

by a remarkably visual purchase animation, the car gently whirring forward to the right accompanied by a breathy chord of voices, it's hard not to feel sucked in all over again.

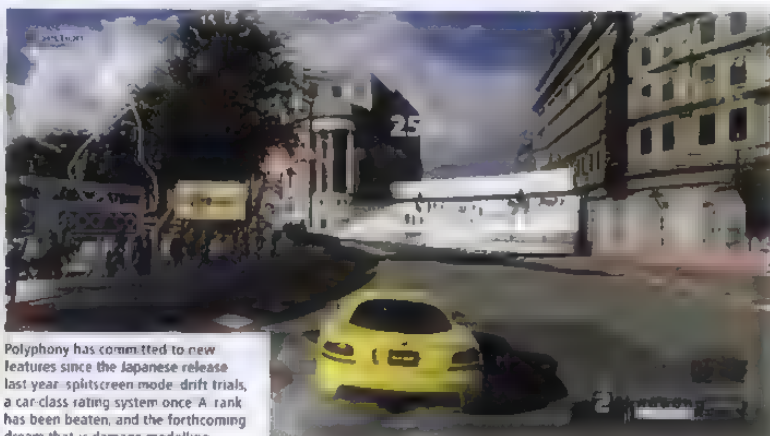
Races are divided between Arcade and Event. Arcade includes races, time trials and drift trials (a return from *Gran Turismo HD Concept* and a new addition since the Japanese release of *Prologue*), though car selections are restricted to those bought using money earned from Events. Events are commendably varied, with single-lap attempts to pass as many competitors as

possible and ten-minute time trials as well as races limited to car marque and class. The effect is to avoid the dryness suffered by *GT4 Prologue*, and even to move *GT* closer to the ethos behind *Project Gotham*, despite the need now and then, for grinding to make the money to buy new cars.

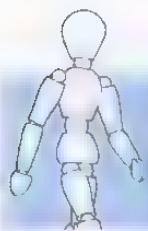
Once on the track, and having adjusted the usual driving aids available, it's clear that *GT's* driving mode has been further refined here. As usual, it's hard to sense it in the slower cars, but once driving the likes of the Nissan GT-R Concept, with its enoyable instability during high-speed corners, the mode begins to come into its own. The new levels of nuance are proved by the degree to which the six tracks on offer are transformed simply by using a different car on them. Opponent AI, meanwhile, actually shows personality, with cars spinning out or understeering on corners with frequency.

As much as *Gran Turismo TV* and its forerunner might push *Prologue* toward being a multimedia experience, the actual racing has become more of a game—a little less clinical, a little more diverse and characterful, without losing any of its earnestly profound love for cars. As a portent for the main release, *Prologue* is at least confirmation of Polyphony's gentle awareness of the rest of the racing videogame market. It's a generous demo that's hard to ignore.

[7]



Polyphony has committed to new features since the Japanese release last year: splitscreen mode, drift trials, a car-class rating system once A rank has been beaten, and the forthcoming dream that is damage modelling



ECHOCHROME

Developed by Sid Stubbins

Echochrome's central conceit is simultaneously simple, brilliant and utterly confounding. Imagine a world in which structures can be manipulated in 3D but traversed in 2D. If two platforms appear linked, simply because you twist the view to make them look that way, then they are. A single solid object is formed, to be crossed by your avatar, an artist's mannequin, which faithfully pounds the path ahead in search of 'Echos' – shadowy flickering humanoid representations, the collection of which comprises the game's main objective.

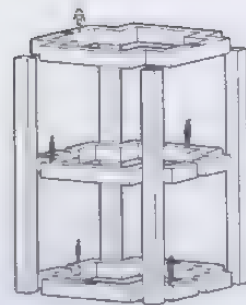
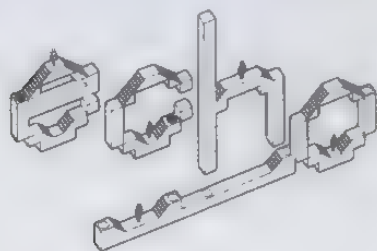
The core of *Echochrome*'s puzzle-solving mechanic is all about this ability to contort and abuse the laws of perspective. Holes enable the player to fall on to platforms that are not actually underneath, for example, simply because they appear to be on a two-dimensional plane. Similar rules enable you to avoid obstacles. Move structures around so that a pillar obscures a hole and, because you can't see it, it's not there – the mannequin walks behind the pillar and out the other side. Reaching such solutions involve rotating the entire level – consisting of minimalist black-and-white arrangements of blocks, stairs, holes and jump pads that hang in the air while a beautiful but faintly dissonant strings section, more familiar with European art-house cinema than PSN downloads, plays along.

At first this is a mind-bending experience, the sort of conceptual brain hump that evokes a Keanu Reeves-like 'Whoah' as the full weight of the potential hits. The rules

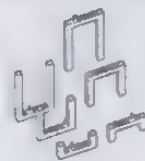
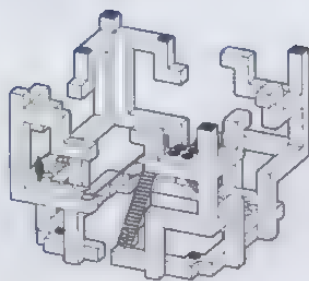
The black circles are holes through which you can fall to lower levels, while white circles catapult you higher. Where you land entirely depends on the game's Orz-infused logic

that govern the perspective-based challenges are simple but incredibly malleable. In some cases, too much so. The ability to tilt and warp levels is so flexible that sometimes it's unclear if you've discovered a prescribed solution or simply misused the immutable laws at hand, achieving success through exploration. Fall through a hole, say, and it's possible to spin the array of platforms wildly to catch the plummeting hero. Sometimes at random. For every moment of epiphany, wide-eyed with an awareness of a resolution, there's an equal number of blunderingly hapless wins, falling or jumping accidentally to new and advantageous positions.

While dry in its presentation, there are moments of humour – this and another level spelling out 'hello', for example. The *Portal*-like female voice intoning a patronising 'whoops' when you fail, however, soon grates



Echochrome's punchy visual style makes the perspective-heavy levels clear and easy to interpret. And this is crucial given that the whole game's main objective is to corrupt and twist everything you can see to win.

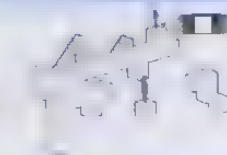


But while the rules that govern victories, intentional or otherwise, appear solid and unwavering, there are some annoying deviations. The game deliberately prevents you from creating certain routes, causing the otherwise smooth rotation of the environment to skip past such opportunities. Presumably this is to prevent easy paths cutting the challenge short, but for a game that so clearly sets out its guidelines it feels like a cheap shot. Then there are the occasional glitches where you can move across apparently uncompleted connections or are turned back by seemingly valid routes. It's not a great issue, but it's enough to make you wonder whether the perspective-twisting freedom you have to achieve your goals is, ironically, just an illusion. But despite the occasional hitch, *Echochrome* provides a rare and idiosyncratic experience, and a serious challenge in its more complex levels. As such, it's a great example of imaginative game design taking a path less travelled. [7]



Each shadowy figure, called an Echo, is a goal. Twisting viewpoints to make routes appear is not always easy, though, and perversely simple environments can be just as tricky as some of the later, epic, constructions.

Create your own headache

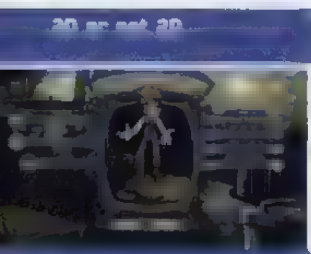


As well as around 60 levels that can be selected at will or played randomly (and DLC's on the way later on), *Echochrome* packs a comprehensive level editor enabling you to build your own Escher-influenced nightmares. It's a puzzle in itself, though, since judging the angles required to make the game's illusion-based mechanic work can require a little trial-and-error to perfect. It's still a welcome addition to the game, though, and worth the perseverance to create something that you can then share with, or rather inflict on, friends.



PENNY ARCADE ADVENTURES: EPISODE ONE

FORMAT: PC, PS3, XBOX 360
PUBLISHER: GREENHOUSE DEVELOPERS: HOTHEAD



One of the better aspects of *Episode One* is the character creation tool, which generates your hero not only in three dimensions but also in two, for cutscenes and dialogue breaks. The selection of features and headwear is limited, particularly for female characters, but having the final result rendered in the distinctive style of Krahulik's penwork will be one of the few thrills on offer for fans devoted enough to pick this up. On completion, the game prompts you to create a save file that will allow you to carry your characters through the series, should you wish to expose them to further abuse

Long-running web comic Penny Arcade has arguably become as much a part of the gaming repertoire furniture as any of the larger news and review sites, and an illustration of how much game fans can achieve when they really throw themselves at it. Publishers clamour for coverage in the three-panel strips, while a loyal audience salvages over whether big titles will be on the receiving end of gurgling praise or piercing barbs. While you'd hope that years of assembling comics around nuggets of gaming criticism would have given the team of writer Jerry Holkins and artist Mike Krahulik a keen eye for potential development pitfalls, the first episode of a series that extends its title to *On The Rain-Slick Precipice Of Darkness* is a game that, were it not their own, the pair would no doubt mercilessly deconstruct and ridicule.

The game is set in a newly crafted steampunk universe – perhaps a conscious effort to avoid alienating those not completely au fait with a decade of jokes and populated by the comic's extended cast of characters. While there's the odd cursory fetch-quest thrown in, the thrust of the game is a seemingly endless series of simplistic, JRPG-inspired active time battles. The twist is that in addition to more standard



Whereas *Final Fantasy* has vast areas to explore as a balance to the repetitive battles, *Penny Arcade* boasts no such luxury, with only three moderately sized levels in which the action plays out

attack, item and summon management, there is the opportunity to perform a timing-based block to counter any incoming attack. Hit the spacebar at the right point during your antagonist's lengthy wind-up animation and you'll block the assault, with a counter-move thrown in if you're picosecond perfect.

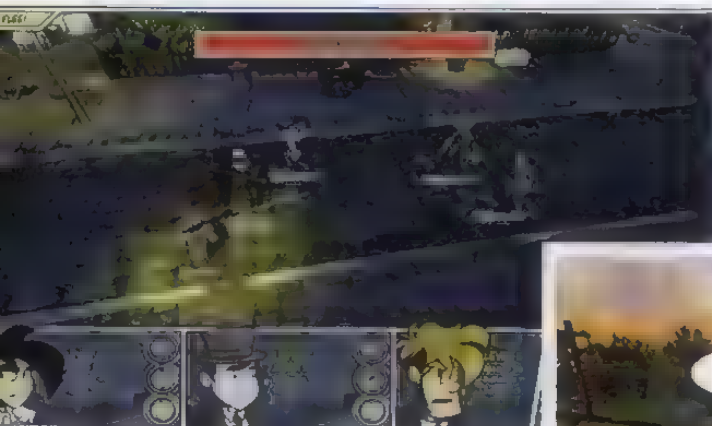
Sadly, the addition of this seemingly innocuous layer to the battle mechanic conspires to diminish the experience. Confrontations swiftly become decided solely on the basis of blocking the majority of attacks as enemies become increasingly overpowered relative to the steady levelling of the three protagonists. Worse, because each move has its own, totally arbitrary window of opportunity, even *Final Fantasy* veterans, seasoned in the art of ATB, will face the unintentionally mocking "Do you wish to continue?" screen over and over again as they attempt to identify and then consistently



The animation is characterful and fitting for the art style throughout, though attack sequences quickly become a tiresome symbol of the poorly managed blocking moves

repeat the manoeuvre. It all bears the unpleasant aroma of a thousand punishing trial-and-error minigames, and serves to negate any depth and complexity that the battles might have mustered alone. Even if there was a varied geography to explore and a variety of tasks to perform this would be a glaring, galling oversight, but with only three discrete areas and missions that are unanimously combat led, it's a big problem.

No doubt the Penny Arcade faithful will find reason to wade through to a predictably torturous and unsatisfying conclusion, but with the episodic development cycle all but demanding that structure and form be locked down in the first instalment, with content added thereafter, the series' future looks precarious at best. No amount of glossy hand-drawn artwork or humorous dialogue is going to heal the problem at the root of this experience.



The dialogue is reasonably well written, if heavy on profanity and scatological humour. Without the aid of the site's selectively italicised blog posts, some of the comic's running gags will no doubt be lost on newcomers



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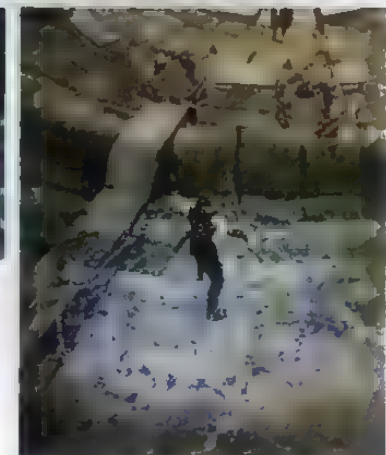
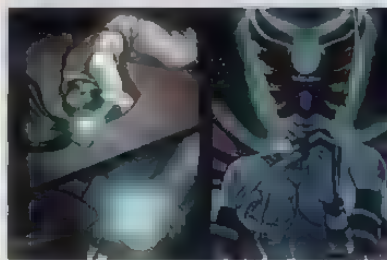
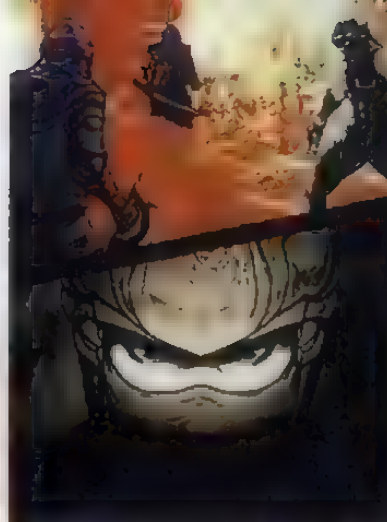
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Decked completely in the sights and sounds of *Ninja Gaiden*, especially in its interface, *Dragon Sword* casts its spell before the game's even begun. Levels end with the exact same debriefs and gradings, though cutscenes rely on pretty slideshows rather than anything realtime



The art isn't great, but bosses at least flounce around with a fair degree of vigour, packing enough moves and health to require all of Ryu's tactics. The textures are simple yet smooth, the beasts large but the framerate slick. In other words, they're as good as DS is capable of

Ninja Gaiden doesn't have a story, just an unending loop of abductions, conspiracies and demonic coups d'état. In *Dragon Sword*, the peace achieved by Hayabusa's vanquishing of the fiends is shattered by the abduction of Momiji, his kunoichi pal, by the mysterious Black Spider Ninja Clan. Who's really behind it? The fiends, of course, who make good their return by sacking Hayabusa Village. Again. Thankfully, the game doesn't patronise you with twists and cutscenes, keeping both to a bare minimum and worrying instead about the Dark Dragonstones which mustn't, of course, fall into the wrong hands. Scattered throughout temples and netherworlds, they conveniently chop things into a handful of large, non-linear levels, each with its own Easter eggs and boss battle.

The belief that *Ninja Gaiden DS* is a recipe for disaster is rooted in misconception. The stylus is too clumsy, the screens too small, the DS too toy like, the developer too blasé, the game too hardcore. In proving all these untrue, Team Ninja has sent the strongest possible signal that, in the absence of knockout graphics and after the imposition of *Dead Or Alive Xtreme*, it's lost none of its smarts.

It helps that *Ninja Gaiden* is among the most deceptively simple games around, with an old-fashioned love of timing and spatial awareness. In *Dragon Sword*, the block is still as important as the strike, with no less than

ten DS buttons assigned to that single command. No matter how you hold the unit. Like *Hotel Dusk*, the game is played in a portrait position—a mere clench of the hand will snap Ryu into his defensive poise, leaving you free to concentrate on the stylus controls that govern almost everything else.

Less an adoption of gestural controls than a dissection, it breaks things down to the slightest strokes and stabs, its combat flowing them together into fluent attacks and combos. An upward flick is a jump which can be engineered to vault between platforms and elevations. Diagonal sword slashes can be crisscrossed into chains, manic pokes unleashing shurikens and arrows. Walking and talking involves simply pointing and holding; where you want to go or tapping who you want to address. And if it all sounds quite tame, wait until you see how quickly it's performed.

Despite a reduction of levels to flick-screens and pop-out backdrops, and enemies to mere cerea-box versions of their usual selves, fights do clutter the DS at times, helped in no small part by the giant hand of the gamer that hangs permanently above it. But to lose yourself in the throngs to mass

the point of *Ninja Gaiden*, Ryu's ability to pinball his way about the screen and attack from all directions. Because *Dragon Sword* focuses the stylus almost exclusively on targets and destinations, you can simply point yourself in and out of trouble at leisure.

It's subliminal, in ways that DS games should be but often aren't. But it's not quite sublime. It loves to defy expectations of a handheld title, loading itself with all the moves, magic powers and texture of the console game, retaining even things it could really do without. Some of its larger fiends delight in lunging, taking you down and molesting you for a few seconds, savaging the game's hard-fought rhythm. And it's tough, its learning curve almost flat but its difficulty curve exponential, the waves of enemies growing larger and more frequent between checkpoints.

In the meantime, though, it at least makes time for some jocular microphone action and dialogue, proving that if there's a gossamer-thin line between gimmick and game on DS, Nintendo isn't alone in seeing it. Team Ninja's finest, most intelligent game since *Ninja Gaiden Black*, it leaves high hopes for the imminent 360 sequel. [7]



Ninpo spells are cast by tapping an icon, triggering the briefest of minigames in which you trace over a glyph



Though there is some significant backtracking required at the end of the main quest, 'pocket taxis' can be bought on your status screen for a nominal amount, allowing you to instantly transport Opoona's party across the world



The average modern-day RPG can't help but feel tired. There are only so many ways you can dress up the fact that the world is in great peril from an ancient evil, and that a teenager with some spells and a stick is going to save it (and discover himself as an adult at the same time). Let's go and awaken the fire spirit with the Sword of Eternity. Ho hum.

Thank ArtePiazza, then, for reminding us that even within these confines it's still possible to be a little bit different. *Opoona's* got the genre staples: family missing, ancient evil, coming-of-age and so on. But it's got more easy charm in its first few hours than most RPGs manage over 30, something it maintains even when the main storyline veers dangerously close to cliché.

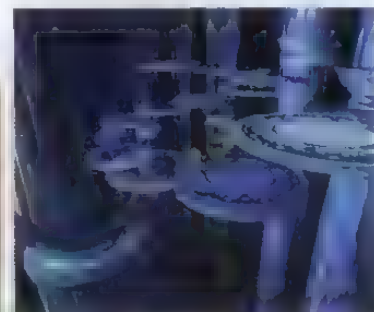
Key to this charm are excellent audio and visuals. The soundtrack is beguiling, each area's theme a finely pitched realisation of its atmosphere: lazy techno loops quietly in the

background, frequently firm-ed up by piano and occasionally a cheeky Spanish guitar makes its own kind of laid-back contribution. It's as good a score as you'll hear in a game of this type, and very occasionally it all cascades into something so beautiful you'll stop moving around and just fiddle with the camera, listening.

You'll occasionally do that for other reasons, such as the attention to detail in *Opoona's* world. Bright cel-shading combines with some equally striking architectural imagination that sees viscous, rippling floors and extended roofs playing host to a huge number of in-game public artworks (ArtePiazza, incidentally, essentially means 'art in a public square') that are surprisingly well-rendered, and always diverting.

The game moves between a main storyline and more freeform occupations that may be taken up (see 'Working nine to five') which play out in residential domes and

Opoona is separated from his family at the beginning of the game, but eventually meets up with his siblings, which adds a welcome layer of strategy – despite appearances, *Opoona* himself is a bit of a bruiser, and not too good with the magic



The later locations showcase a unique imagination: your feet leave ripples in the floors above, and the circles twist around each other while you descend.



The random encounters can become irritating after you've reached a certain level, where the enemies are dismissed relatively easily and quickly. Fortunately, you can make use of cloaks in order to avoid battles.

outdoor sections featuring random battles. If these encounters occasionally grate as the game wears on, it's through no fault of the innovative and finely tuned battle system, which combines turn-based preparation with realtime actions, and uses the Nunchuk's analogue stick to 'flick' the bonbon weapon that floats above your head at enemies. This can be upgraded and 'coated' in various statuses and thrown in four different arcs – it's possible to knock foes out of their stride during a move, or bully them with constant hits so they can't respond. Equally, if you get caught alone against four or five, you may not get the chance to respond.

Hampening the experience is a flawed camera, whose failings become pronounced in closed spaces when it gets stuck behind walls. During the 'dungeon' areas the game adopts a fixed viewpoint, but this often means that key rooms and treasure chests are obscured, and an element of trial-and-error enters the proceedings as you Hoover around the bottom of the screen for items that may be just out of shot.

Opoona isn't perfect and, while there's a hint of both *Mother* and *Okami* in its design, it never quite scales the heights of those games. But that's no enormous criticism, and *Opoona* has enough character that, combined with its innovative combat and leisurely pace through an interesting world, it is comfortably its own experience. [7]

Working nine to five



Quite apart from the main quest, which maps on to *Opoona's* increasing rank as a Ranger (essentially, a fighter of the 'rogues' that infest certain areas of the planet), the various domes offer a number of licences that give access to different occupations. These vary in what they demand of the player, and the skills they allow you to use later in the game: in one example, one of your friends later in the game needs a rare item that can only be found by fishing – which you learn to do by becoming a Seamaster. However, others are less practical: becoming a fortune teller involves little more than guessing what people want to hear. It may be quite an accurate and wry comment on careers in ball-gazing, but that doesn't make it fun.



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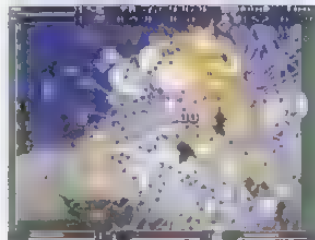
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Like *WarioWare* before it, *Bangai-O Spirits* is an exercise in reducing videogaming's first principles to a torrent of micro-levels. But where the games differ is in the execution and challenge of their myriad tasks. If *WarioWare* is an introduction to mainstream videogame convention then *Bangai-O Spirits*, as you might expect from Treasure, is a masterclass in twitch extremism. 160 short, sharp levels based upon the engine, rules and assets of the Dreamcast and N64 classic, *Bangai-O*, see the company's previous output ingeniously stripped down to its constituent parts.

Throughout, you pilot a mech that's but ten pixels tall, the size of a mouse pointer. You've a choice of two main weapons from a bank of seven and the two trigger buttons release *Bangai-O's* famous bombardment of up to 100 missiles, their size and ferocity increasing the closer an enemy bullet is to hitting you at the point of deployment. These fundamentals are then spun out into a wide variety of play styles and challenges. Sometimes a puzzle game, sometimes a fighting game, always a shooting game, the range and subtlety of the game's colourful and busy stages astonishes.

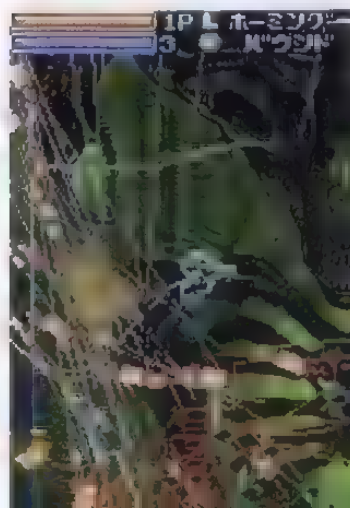
By contrast, the presentation is stark and functional. Several short introductory levels teach the game's basics but even these are optional. Instead you're free to tackle any of the game's 160 levels in any order, right from the start of the game. Upon successful completion of a level the



The seven stock weapons can be combined to create hybrid effects. While finding the right combination can be the key to clearing a puzzle, more often success is attainable with any set-up.

game records the time taken to beat it and the number of points you earned from pick-ups. There's no Nintendo-esque indication of whether your score on either of these counts is good, but as the difficulty soon ramps up, in time just clearing a stage is prize enough.

In contrast to *WarioWare* it's a game whose intricacies reveal over time, until clearing every one of the 160 core stages becomes a pursuit impossible to walk away from. While certainly being Treasure's most fragmented game, there's a sense that the lack of narrative, character and even proper framework makes this its most raw, pure and delightful. [9]



The level editor is one of the most powerful and ingenious yet seen, a touch of the Select button opening up a console for editing even in the main game. Levels can then be exchanged online via audio files played into the DS microphone.



Combat includes an element of the original's counterattack-based design and a number of combos. Given the jerky animation, they're hard to pull off, and it's a lot easier to joylessly button-bash your way through.

A generous sprinkling of checkpoints usually shows confidence in a game's design that it's robust enough to provide challenge and longevity without undue frustration. And then there's the foundation of them in *Altair's Chronicles*. Often mere seconds apart they betray quite the opposite: rough attempts to mitigate the rash of glitches and faults that pervades its seven- or eight-hour span.

The central problem is that Gameloft has apparently thought better of giving *Altair* a 2D environment to run through. Instead, it's 3D, viewed from a lofty fixed angle that regularly leaves various fundamental pieces of scenery out of view as it pans up and down and from side to side. Sometimes bits of

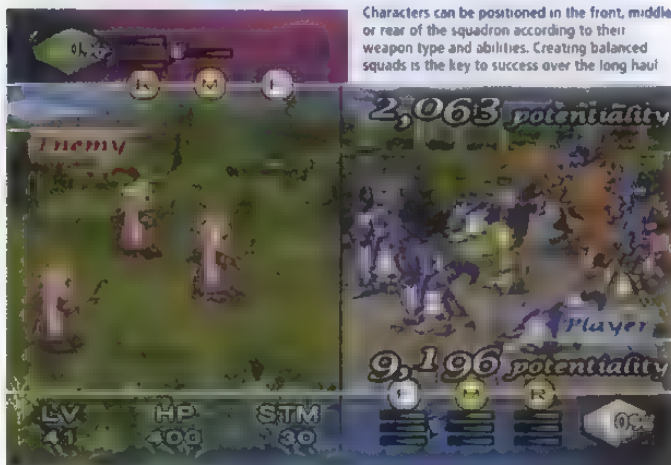
architecture will obscure *Altair's* path, having failed to fade to transparency. It's also terrible for imparting depth: leaping for ropes is usually a matter of guesswork and faith, while imperceptibly overhanging roofs will confound attempts to climb. The height of narrow beams and the swing of hanging blades are also made impossible to judge.

Though there's a rudimentary story involving a quest for a magical chalice, in this prequel to last year's big console blockbuster, progress is really driven by the large green arrow that points towards the next waypoint. Forget the original's free-roaming ethos: this is a clumsy throwback to the original *Prince Of Persia*. It does however shoehorn in basic versions of assassinations, eavesdropping, pickpocketing and forcing confessions. The latter two are represented by dreary stylus minigames, confessions for instance, are forced with an *Ouendan*-inspired rhythm game that neglects to add any rhythm.

With juddering 3D that loses all of *Altair's* beautiful and intuitive movement, and inflicting a multitude of cheap deaths, this crude chapter neither comes close to emulating original's successes nor utilises the hardware's specific capabilities. And all those checkpoints suggest that Gameloft knows it. [3]



Curiously for a DS game, *Altair's Chronicles* features protracted loading screens. The minigames, meanwhile, feature slightly different aesthetics and feel to the main game, as well as suddenly requiring stylus control. It dampens what little atmosphere is generated overall.



Characters can be positioned in the front, middle or rear of the squadron according to their weapon type and abilities. Creating balanced squads is the key to success over the long haul.

It seems that Nippon Ichi's ideas take two attempts to perfect. If *La Puella Tactics* was the company's initial, tentative testing of the SRPG's borders, then it was *Disgaea* that tore through them. *Phantom Brave* first removed the genre's chessboard underlay but it was *Maka Kingdom* that brought freedom. On this basis it seems likely that *Soul Nomad* will act as another interesting but imperfect first attempt at genre subversion.

The core conceit is clever. At the team set-up stage your soldiers, mages and other assorted units must be grouped together into separate 'rooms', physical metaphors for squad groupings. Rooms contain up to a maximum of nine squares and offer differing formations and you can assign a single character to each square up to that maximum. A single unit icon on the battle map represents this grouping, which is moved around the map to attack and defend in the standard SRPG format. When an encounter is triggered, the game switches to an *Advance Wars*-esque sideways-on view, squad members taking turns to attack the other side in an interesting twist on the system.

Visually, it's the company's easiest accomplished PlayStation 2 game, a problem born not only from the low-quality sprites and bland, basic 3D objects but also the low number of actual assets within the game. Conversations with NPCs are often



Rooms boast different built-in bonuses, dubbed 'decors', and, as the game moves onward, the number of rooms and their associated unit spaces and decors increases to open up the strategy.

simply textual dialogues without even a portrait to add character and interest. The maps are 2D textures, with features such as mountains and valleys drawn on in jagged lines.

Nippon Ichi's games have always promoted substance over style but never before has one appeared so bland. This plain aesthetic extends to the story and dialogue. While the original Japanese clearly makes snubs at the kind of outrageous humor that characterised *Disgaea*, the English translation is vanilla and lifeless. Fortunately, every cutscene can be skipped, as if these interludes are irritations to be avoided rather than narrative pistons to drive things along.

The poor execution, and a fussy menu system that continues to trip players up many times, in mean that *Soul Nomad* is arguably the company's weakest game yet. Still, underneath these niggles and inconsistencies lies the kernel of a solid and interesting game that could blossom if pursued in a future release. [6]



When a player is willing to spend half an hour starting and re-starting a single four-second section, you can guarantee that the game is both utterly maddening and addictive enough for it not to matter. Best described as a physics-enabled *Knight Rider*, *RedLynx Trials 2* sees you and your stunt bike attempt to conquer a number of obstacle courses, seemingly constructed out of industrial building materials and all housed in the same gloomy warehouse. *Trials 2* isn't exactly reaching for the stars with its formula, but it's nonetheless a solid production for what it is – which sounds like faint praise considering just how hungry the game consumes swathes of your time, compelling you to inch further up the leaderboards.

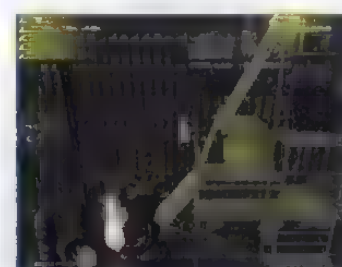
Movement exists only in a single plane, with the player controlling the bike's velocity and the body position of the rider, through which you affect the degree to which the bike rolls forwards or backward from a jump. The bike's handling manages to insinuate credible weight while being tightly and elastic enough to present a constant challenge – and what a challenge that is. Just completing a course – even a nominally easy one – will see your rider's body slapping into the concrete in an unending variety of physics-enabled contortionism. Thankfully, restarts are instantaneous in a way that the *Stuntman* series



At heart, of course, RedLynx's *Trials* games are logical progressions of *Action SuperCross* and *Elasto Mania*. *Trials 2* doesn't yet have an editor, but RedLynx has said that one is in the works.

would do well to learn from, and races are checkpointed (although these are sometimes placed inappositely, not permitting a decent run at the next stunt). If you get stuck you can flick straight to the online leaderboard and, in a single click, watch how the world number one mastered the course. You can even use them as a ghost as you attempt the track yourself.

As a game, *Trials 2* is small and cheap – and no worse for that – but the limited scale and variety of its gameplay is inevitably challenged by more expansive games, ying in the bargain bin. However, its community features, encompassing persona pages, teams, chatrooms and achievements, put most big-budget games to shame, and make for a more engaging experience than its modest arcadey gameplay would suggest. [7]



A selection of camera angles can be selected for replay. Brilliantly, when watching someone else's replay, the individual key-presses that player has made are displayed, allowing you to learn from the best riders in the world.



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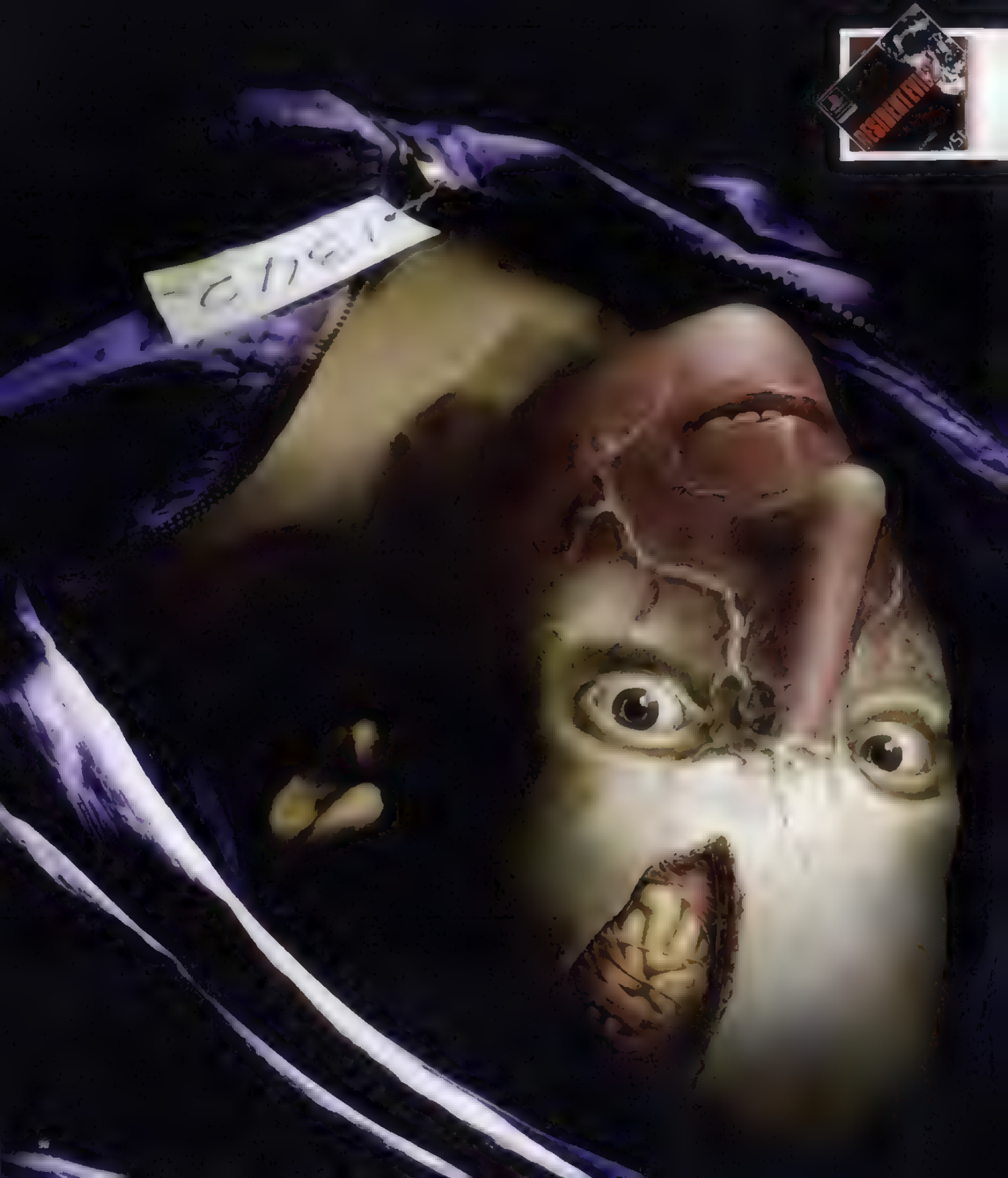
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RESIDENT EVIL 2

FORMAT: DC, GC, N64, PC, PS
 PUBLISHER: CAPCOM
 DEVELOPER: IN-HOUSE (PRODUCTION STUDIO 4)
 COUNTRY: JAPAN
 RELEASE: 21/1/1998

After a false start and two years of work, Capcom had one thing to say to Real's rabid fans: you have once again entered the world of survival horror.

The videogame industry is dependent on sequels. They're a more or less guaranteed source of income, a way to re-use expensive engines and assets, and they're welcomed by fans and (most) critics alike. But one thing always presents a problem. Atmosphere. The thrill of the first time is almost impossible to replicate, and most sequels simply dilute what was there, turning well-remembered but isolated moments into series trademarks and nudge-nudge references. But for every rule there are exceptions. And then there's *Resident Evil 2*.

Resident Evil laid the template for 'survival horror' by punctuating its claustrophobic setting with moments of attritional combat: you were always in small rooms and tight corridors, fighting one or two (very occasionally three) enemies. *Resident Evil 2* takes this idea and expands it into a city, concentrating on the 'survival' part of the equation in terms of both pacing and scale. Where the original delayed its first zombie encounter for a few rooms, and gradually introduced foes via a drip-feed, *Resident Evil 2* begins with your car crashing in a street full of zombies, forcing you to run for sanctuary, bumping into fellow humans only for them to be overwhelmed by the ever-present and encroaching mass.

In these first ten minutes zombies

surround you, burst windows, break through gates and relentlessly shamble forward in groups you just don't have the ammunition to take down. The solitary groaners have become a more aggressive and numerous horde that doesn't let the little scenery details get in the way. It's all scripted, of course, and *Resident Evil 2* is as culpable as any other entry in the series for letting you escape through doors and down stairs, but the escape that begins the game allows no time for reflecting on the linearity of your route – there's simply a relief that there's somewhere

The opening streets contain the detritus of the outbreak and rear-guard action: mostly burning vehicles, dead police and zombies



The game always reminds you that enemies are encroaching, that you are pitting your finite resources against an infinite foe

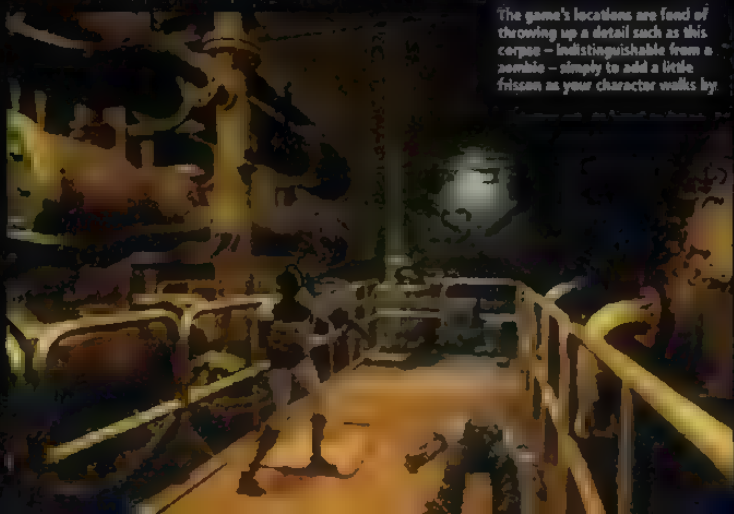
anywhere, you're being funnelled through and away from the immediate threat.

Throughout, this illusion of an infested city is maintained, whether through instant shocks or finding desperate notes from long-dead groups trying to survive. Outside, police vehicles blockade the streets, overturned cars burn, and temporary barriers are everywhere – relics of desperate, failed attempts to stop the undead's progress. When inside and passing through a previously safe corridor, hands will suddenly burst

through the boarded windows and try to drag you outside. Later, you'll be able to close shutters over the same windows, but even they only slow down the tide and are eventually broken through: a cutaway shows zombies pouring in through the windows, sliding over shards of glass and on to the floor. It all adds up to a pervasive sense of the environment, rather than the player, being under siege. At another point, you find a cocky reporter who insists on staying locked in the cells for his own safety – shortly after you've moved on, another cutaway partially shows a monster with a grotesquely huge eye (and gloriously squishy sound effects) in his cell, forcing a tailed polyp down his throat. You run back to the cell, the reporter croaks out a few words and is then split in two by a monster bursting straight out of Alien. The game uses these cuts selectively and brilliantly, always reminding you that enemies are encroaching, that the rooms you've 'cleared' are no longer clear, that you are pitting your finite resources against an infinite foe.

They also pace your movements throughout the game's world: while *RE2* is as much about exploration as its

The game's locations are fond of throwing up a detail such as this corpse – indistinguishable from a zombie – simply to add a little frisson as your character walks by.





predecessor, here it feels less like clicking pieces into a puzzle than desperately searching for an escape route. The structure of *Resident Evil 2* is labyrinthine, and although Capcom's tools are the same as ever (multiple-part locks and key sets being particular favourites), any backtracking is well disguised by rooms being refreshed with new foes, new set-pieces and – most of all – the temptation of new fragments from ongoing stories.

The greatest example of this, and a replay concept that few games have matched, is the 'B' scenario: when you complete the game as either Claire or Leon, you then play through the game as the other character taking the other, complementary route. You crisscross at moments you've already seen from one side, and deal with situations that were in the background the first time around. The changes aren't cosmetic: a high-octane helicopter crash immediately frames your approach to the police station (you come across the smouldering wreckage much later in the 'A' scenario), and you'll have to zig-zag across a zombie-filled court, fight clouds of crows, and take on a flicker with a handgun in the first few rooms. But Capcom is always a benevolent tease, and quickly rewards you with a grenade launcher. You'll need it, though, for Mr X.

This silent figure, a hint of the original's unfinished tyrant beneath his trenchcoat, pursues you throughout the 'B' scenario with relentless purpose. After completing one puzzle, he bursts through the wall inches from you, scattering bricks and mortar across the room. If you escape, he simply bursts back through the same wall, his huge frame blocking the narrow corridor between you and the door. Another time, you reach the end of a metal walkway and glance at a security camera, only to see him following the same one-way path. You can knock him out, but it's only temporary. It's notable how much of the series since *RE2* has borrowed from its replay innovations and the 'B' scenarios: *RE3*'s Nemesis is clearly an extension of Mr X, the 'Fourth Survivor' mode (see 'Night Of The Living Veg') has inspired similar bonus modes in every subsequent sequel, and *RE4*'s Ashley dynamic is prefigured in the short sections where you guard or control Sherry.

Quite apart from its importance to the series mechanically, however, is *RE2*'s decaying atmosphere, which even the superlative *RE4* struggles to match. What a sense of place it has: every prerendered backdrop made to work, every object implying something. The first time you enter the corrupt police chief's office, the camera intently focuses on the player.

It's the details that make *Resident Evil* so special: the spilled coffee cup, the wound on the man's back, and the remains of his desperate effort to soak the plant with petrol.



HEY, DEADHEAD

Resident Evil 2's success saw it become part of the cultural fabric for 20-somethings in the late '90s. The most obvious manifestation of this was in *Spaced*: episode three of series one opened to the police station music, and Tim unloading a shotgun into a downed zombie, explaining to Daisy that the game is "a subtle blend of lateral thinking and extreme violence". The show mixes in nods to the *Evil Dead* trilogy, but returns to *RE2* for the climax: while watching performance theatre, Tim drunkenly mistakes the artist for a zombie, punches him, and drags his friends out with Leon's words "There's no need for us to be here any longer – let's split up, look for survivors and get out of here!"



Hideki Kamiya, the game's chief director, has spoken about how he and his team tried to create an "action film atmosphere" (ESG).



NIGHT OF THE LIVING VEG

The G-virus is behind the events of the game, but it's also the focus of 'The Fourth Survivor', unlocked after completing all four character runthroughs: this is the first appearance of series stalwart Hunk, as always the sole survivor of his unit. You have to escape from the lab – the opposite trajectory to the main game – and the locations are now infested with monsters. After escaping, the game casually tells you've delivered the G-virus to Umbrella, and that the end of this nightmare is just the prelude to another. Of course, if you're really good you could complete the game six times with an 'A' rank, which gives you the chance to play as a lump of tofu (below)

framed by the large wooden door behind and flanked by two sets of shelves – one topped with a stuffed lemur, the other jammed with GCSE formaldehyde jars of indeterminate origin. Stepping forward to the sound of your own footsteps, the rich mahogany fittings and red carpet lead to a desk bearing the police chief's

just the right side of terrifyingly daft – after all, the time for ironic smiles is after you've dealt with the huge eyeball surrounded by teeth. Where series moments like the "master of Unlocking" are remembered for genuine awfulness, *RE2* has a level of knowing that puts its story and dialogue, when it's not serviceable,

William Birkin's gradual transformation from mousey scientist into train-consuming pus-bag manages to stay the right side of terrifyingly daft

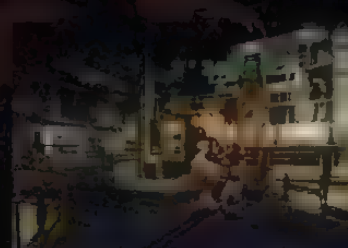
badge of office – a woman in a white dress, the mayor's daughter, lays across it with a bullet wound through her stomach. The chief is there; she's going to turn into a zombie, he explains, unless he shoots her through the head or decapitates her. "And to think," he says, the camera turning to his mounted animals, "taxidermy used to be my hobby..."

Ignoring this aspect of *RE2* would be a mistake: for what it sets out to do, the storyline and dialogue is magnificent. It is truly, madly, deeply schlocky – and revels in it. William Birkin's gradual transformation from mousey scientist into train-consuming pus-bag dictates the pace of the second half of the game, and somehow manages to stay

well on the side of the undead angels: as Leon and Claire speed away from zombie hordes in the opening cutscene, he casually reminds her to "buckle up".

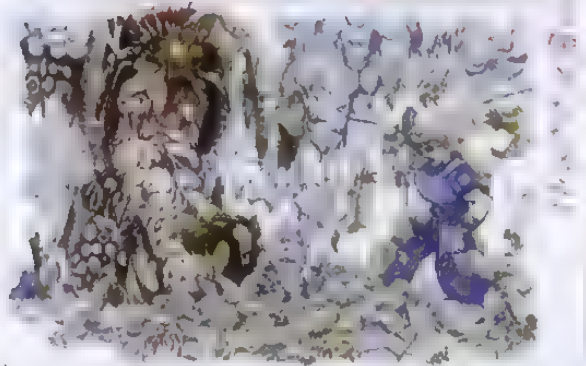
And because of this excess, *Resident Evil 2* and the tale of the G-virus is perhaps the closest the series has yet come to warranting the comparisons to George A Romero's films. It's there in the details: the paper trail around the virus and William Birkin is a plain warning about obsession and the compromises it leads to: all the way from little debts and favours up to sanctioned killing. The ultimate symbol of democratic authority, a police station, is here little more than a destroyed husk infested with crowds of monsters; the sewers actually play

Let's not criticise the series' fixed cameras for once, but admire the direction of this scene: from the top, you see something moving outside; after entering, you're 'viewed' through the next window; you move down the corridor and see the smashed window, find a headless corpse on the floor, and then the licker makes its entrance from the ceiling.



Mr X is finished off in a Terminator-esque molten pool – or so you think. This being Capcom, he just comes back a lot angrier and faster, minus his trench coat

Concept sketches for the main characters and a raft of enemies. Of particular note is the level of detail built up on the Tucker model over time and the emphasis on scale in all of the boss fights - though the moth never lived up to this depiction. And why is Leon wearing Umbrella armour?





home to the alligator of urban myth, mould covers the walls of the science labs; and almost all of the survivors you meet turn out to be more interested in pursuing their own ends than working together to survive. It adds up to a bleak picture of what Raccoon City was before this began: built on venality, and brought low by those same base motivations. It's a knockback to the popular (populist?) theory that the *Resident Evil* games are just dumb zombie shooters.

But if that's the bigger picture, what accentuates *RE2*'s unique atmosphere are the little things. There are moments that could only be described as poignant: the party organised for Leon's arrival at the RPD can be found in one of the rooms, blood-spattered tables upturned against the doors, party hats untouched, all guarded by a wounded survivor who jokes about it being cancelled. You'll return here later and notice other little details: find the memo from 'the boys at RPD' to Leon on one table, the streamers mixed in with the blood, the shattered plaster around the door frames – but you'll only have the time to notice these things after killing, without thought, that wounded survivor who has now turned. On your way out there's a blue poster, 'Welcome Leon', next to some untouched liquor, as all goes silent but for your footsteps.

Listening to your footsteps might not seem the most obvious place to find greatness, but everything about *RE2*'s audio is as exceptionally tuned as the visuals. There are themes that recur in key areas, with dull organs and dim piano

lingering creating an ominous background, but the genius lies in the number of sound effects that give life to the locations and characters. Many rooms are silent, bar those footsteps echoing on the various surfaces. Some simply feature an office fan creakily turning. Some have the low hum of machinery, which in others is so loud it dangerously obscures other noises. Allied to this, each creature has its own signature noise (a key compensation for the often restrictive camera views) that alerts you to its presence. These are masterfully composed, not only for the atmospheric contribution but also for telegraphing their movement: the laryngeal groans of zombies vary in tone as they begin shambling towards something; the soft pad of a dog's feet turns into a torn bark and a

The laryngeal groans of zombies and the phlegmy breathing of the lickers hint at danger before they even begin screaming or running at you

gallop as it begins to run; and the magnificent, phlegmy breathing of the lickers hints at danger before they even begin screaming or running at you, their deformed limbs a dull thwack of organic matter on the floor.

In mechanics, structure and tone, *Resident Evil 2* is a game as comfortable with a great predecessor as is possible. It might not be obvious at first glance, but the police station is structurally modelled on the Arklay mansion: the lobby room a flipped version of the mansion's, right down to the initially locked doors and upstairs access. It's no coincidence that one of *RE2*'s first great moments, the



The game's opening, in which your character is immediately attacked by four zombies – with more lurking offscreen for careless runners.

entrance of the licker, happens in a long windowed corridor that turns at 90 degrees, a mirror image of the mansion's corridor where dogs burst through glass to attack you. The designers trust you to notice these

quiet nods, even while building a new sense of foreboding around them: before meeting the licker you've seen something quickly pass across the window of the previous room, and on entering the corridor the glass is already broken through, a headless corpse lying on the floor.

Similar comparisons and extensions feature throughout – the small lab of the first as tributary to the gargantuan research facility found here, the sentient plant life that wanders its corridors recalling the worries Arklay scientists had about Plant 42's development. But dwelling on *Resident Evil 2*'s status as a sequel for too long would miss the point. It's something all of its own – perhaps videogaming's greatest B-movie. Thoughtful and trashy in equal measure, it achieves more than should have been possible in both mechanics and thematic, squeezing a modern game around antiquated controls and dictating the direction of a series that, until *RE4*, just had no idea of how to follow it up. For all that can be said about *Resident Evil 2*, there's one word it suits in every sense: it's

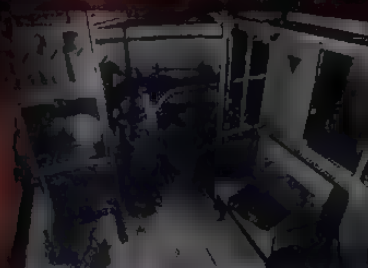


HALF-BAKED BRAINS

The sequel to *Resident Evil* began development almost immediately after the first game's release, but as the finish line neared Capcom was unhappy with it – and began again from scratch. The game still starred Leon and a Claire prototype named Eliza Walker, but supporting characters such as Marvin Branagh, the policeman who turns into a zombie, and Robert Kendo, the gun-shop owner who dies in the first few minutes, had much greater roles – and some interesting ideas were lost in the redesign, including zombies' ability to open doors or crawl under them, and the police station's cells (with zombie prisoners reaching through the bars). It's recognisable in places – particularly the lab location – but significantly different to warrant a look, and there's a long clip of the game at the PlayStation Museum (www.playstationmuseum.com/games/graveyard).



The STARS office is hidden away in the upper corners of the station, away from the main business, and full of junk. Everyone, of course, thought they were dead.



The early atmosphere comes from implication: the abandoned briefcase, glass and blood-smeared seats next to the slumped driver explain why this bus is blocking the road. Customarily, the radio will continue playing throughout.

monstrous game



gasm
rao

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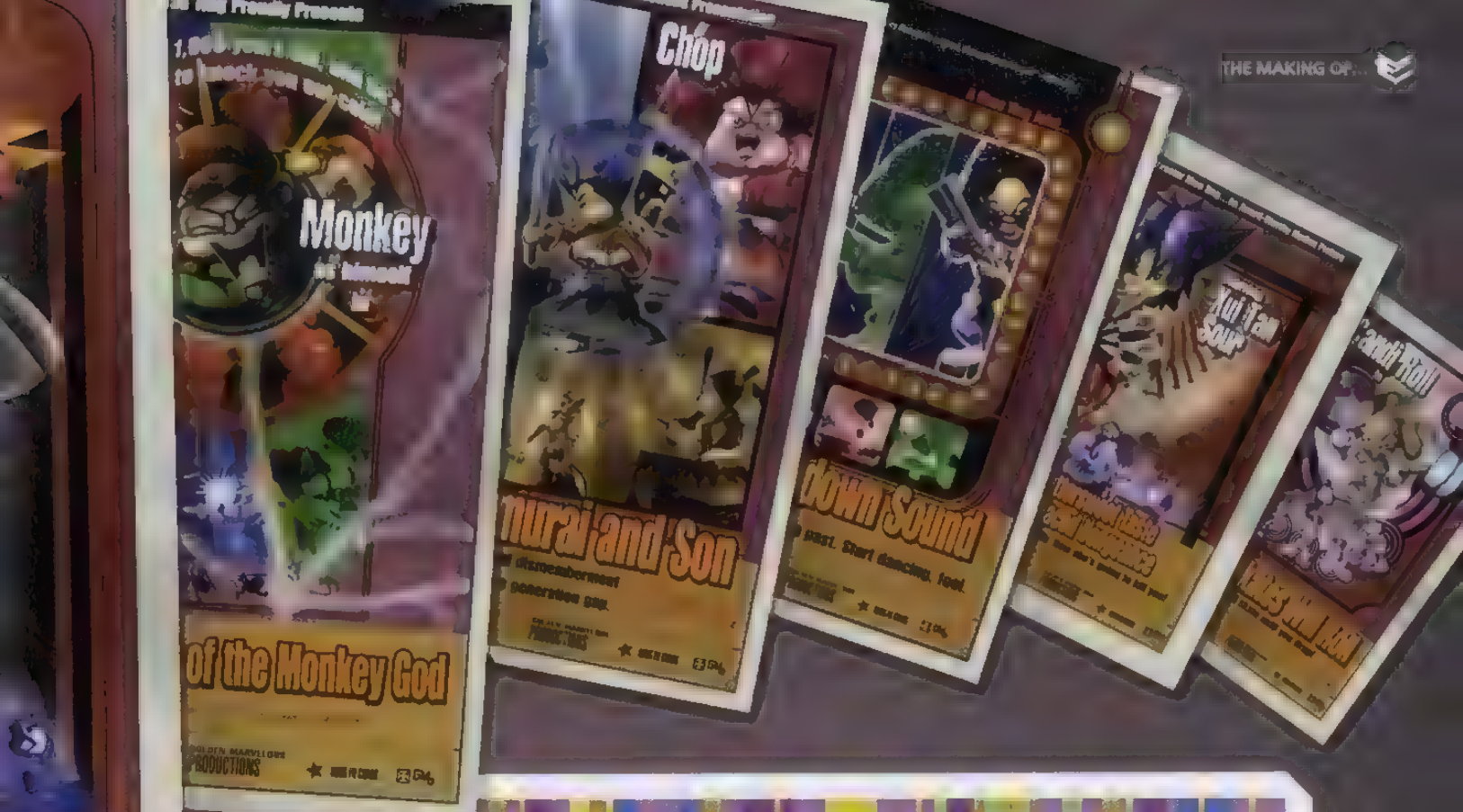
out Dead

MARVELOUS
CTIONS ★

GOLDEN MARVELOUS

★ KUNG FU CHAOS





THE MAKING OF... KUNG FU CHAOS

Place bets now! How many people can '70s-themed fighting game, that falls apart on purpose, rub up the wrong way? Betting ends!

FORMAT: XBOX PUBLISHER: MICROSOFT DEVELOPER: JUST ADD MONSTERS ORIGIN: UK RELEASE DATE: 2003

...or a studio standing at the forefront of gaming, Ninja Theory deals an awful lot in antiquities – types of game that have, often for entirely the wrong reasons, been exiled to history. It's made good the contradiction, *Heavenly Sword* escaping PS3's mangled launch to sell over a million copies worldwide. And it's suffered for it, which is where *Kung-Fu Chaos* comes in.

Born during the developer's Just Add Monsters days, when it was just a couple of guys and a game with a wealth of experience but no cash, this Xbox exclusive ranks among the most misunderstood, wronged and plain unlucky games ever made. A B-movie showdown staged, literally, on a stage, fought beneath the gaze of a howling director named Shao Ting, it was as personal a party game for

designer Tameem Antoniades, a self-professed *Bomberman* fanatic, as it was a commercial gamble for Microsoft, its publisher.

"I resigned from Sony to dedicate myself to design," says Antoniades, in a Ninja Theory office mere feet from – of all places – that of Sony Cambridge. "I looked at about 30 combat games to see how they block, how they punch, how they move, what animations they use – and I wrote it all down. And I did that full-time, day and night, for about four months."

He slides the result preciously across the table, ring-bound and split into different facets of the game he had in mind. Little more than pamphlets at a glance, these unique design documents are jammed with pictures of radii, trajectories, causes and effects. Footnotes reference *Mario 64* and

Power Stone, the depth of analysis such that only one thing seems lacking: words. He explains: "I wanted to create something that any artist, animator or programmer could break down and understand. And also the parameters that a designer would want to tweak and modify to get it feeling right. So I specifically avoided using Word docs because they encourage you to write verbally; I wanted to describe everything visually. I've not seen any design docs like it since, but I think it's how we do things now."

Although *Bomberman* was, for Antoniades, "like a poker game I might played for two years," he somehow found time to watch the melee of Hong Kong action movies, finding particular joy in those of Woolworth's own Jackie Chan. "I loved that whole vibe of the interaction with the



HARD TARGET

Regarding *Kung-Fu Chaos*' continued absence from Xbox Originals or 360's backwards compatibility list, Antoniadis has a confession. "One of the things we said to Microsoft was that we wanted the game to run at 60 frames per second," he explains. "I wish we'd shut up, because they actually put it in the contract that every milestone had to be at 60 frames per second. It got to a point where we wanted to add more effects, the '70s filter etc, so we went to a special interfaced rendering mode which can only work if you stay at 60; it never drops out of it. If it does, the whole screen jars massively. They had a test setup at Microsoft that would just automatically track the game, and if there was ever so much as a one-frame spike, it would come back as a failure. But we did it, though it meant the game couldn't run on progressive-scan TVs. I suspect that's why they can't get it working."

environment that he had, the stunts and things like that. And I loved the fact that they'd parody or create action equivalents of big Hollywood movies.

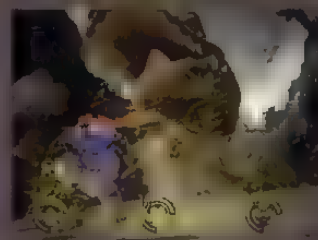
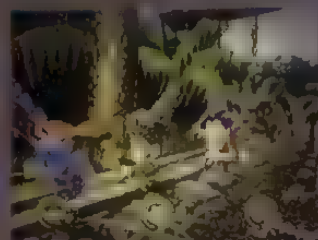
Kung-Fu Chaos, then, was a parody of parodies – gaming's parallel of flicks like *Mr Vampire* (which unwittingly lent the game one of its characters, Master Shon-Yu) and *Armour Of God*. But it wasn't enough to revel in such a niche, and so the cast swelled to more widely reflect '70s schlock, from blaxploitation (*Lucy Cannon*) to roller jam (*Candi Roll*). With a fake DVD cover that, as you can see on the opening page, explains the game to a tee, Antoniadis, with fellow Ninja Theorists Nina Kristensen (chief developer) and Mike Bell (chief programmer), took the fight to Microsoft.

"We were the antithesis of Microsoft at that point," he smiles, "just a small bunch of people that were hands-on-deck, just make-the-game. Before they signed the game, they came down to do a due diligence check – to make sure we were the real deal. We'd expanded massively from three people to eight, and even had an

office. Then they came down and there were more of them than there were us, all of them demanding documentation. So we've stopped working and spent the next month just writing. To their credit, though, we are still using those processes.

"They were getting a lot of stick: a lot of the bad press Sony's been getting recently, they were getting then. And my experience was that they were new to it but extraordinarily smart. A lot of the people there were passionate, experienced gamers. And they understood things that people in the industry still cannot grasp. Good pipelines, good production methodologies and a focus on play-testing and usability. In my mind, that's a revolution in development – and it's still not being adopted by publishers."

Microsoft's rigour, taken for granted now thanks to the extraordinary QA of Live Arcade and immaculate finish of its first-party games, was a shock to the system in 2002. And when it came to this oddball – a game in which the fourth wall collapsed, breaking the other walls with it – restriction was inevitable.



Having the way for *Heavenly Sword*, *Chaos* borrowed *Cambria* for more procedural fighting. One button-press could always trail to another.

was that serious. So we strung together all the levels and created the singleplayer mode, which worked fairly well but didn't compromise how far we could take things; it wasn't as good as something like *Viewtiful Joe*. We did that, went through a bunch of tests – and then people said the singleplayer game was too short. So we spent a month creating the

"When they showed it to a bunch of teenagers one girl said: 'This game is really badly made because it's all just falling apart'."

"They were really big on focus testing at that point. And the way we designed our levels – the Hong Kong version of *Titanic*, say – was to have the set just fall apart while you were fighting on it, with the cardboard cut-out people just falling down the decks. And when they showed this to a bunch of teenagers and asked their opinion, of course one girl said: 'This game is really badly made because it's all just falling apart'. That's where I learned the value of focus tests."

"Halfway through the game's development, they did some more and said: 'No one's going to buy this if it's multiplayer only'. They were ready to can the game – it

was a variety mode, where we took all the levels and made three versions of each, just creating these silly little rules. We made 27 of them, literally in the space of four weeks. And then, three months before release, they said they wanted it to work online. That was it – there was no way we could have reverse-engineered everything at that point.

Only that wasn't it. When it comes to questions of race, it takes a nation of millions to hold back Public Enemy, but just one disgruntled American to all but kill *Kung-Fu Chaos*. "We got to the point of releasing the game and it



Antoniadis: "There wasn't any real collision system between the characters. All was all based on timing through the animation and proximity to the enemy."



Fights were partly to support some underused power bars, mostly to capture that all-important '70s fighting spirit. Some terrific bubbling was achieved vocally, the visuals unable to convey the full horror.



Considering the cries of racism from the US, surprisingly few Asian characters appear in *Kung-Fu Chaos*. Chop 'n' Spik were based on Robin Swicord's *Lowee Wolf and Cabb*, with Xai Yan Saur representing the generic kung-fu heroine. "But the male's 'How Delaware,'" protests Antoniadis. "HE'S just pretending."

went out to reviews, and EGM scored it something like 55 per cent. Their whole review was about how racist it was, and that comment was picked up by everyone else. And Microsoft completely panicked. I think they just wanted the game to die, to just go away. So, while it got released, all the marketing I've seen for it was a single-page ad in one magazine. A lot of magazines, and a radio show, got in touch with us for our side of the story – but Microsoft were insistent that we didn't fan the flames; we were told to say nothing.

"I've spent a lot of time in the US since then, and I can kind of understand where those accusations come from. Their culture is completely different to ours; we're used to laughing at ourselves in every way, shape and form. In America, they don't get that. And it's a very segregated society where racism is really quite rampant, so there's this ultra-PC sensibility – and it comes from middle-class white people who are talking on behalf of a perceived group or problem. That was the quite distasteful, hypocritical side of the whole thing. So whereas things like *Banzai* and *Bo Selecta* are just funny – whether you like

them or not, they're just satire and parody – there, you can't get away with it."

There's a funny story about Microsoft, *Banzai* and *Kung-Fu Chaos*, and it goes something like this. Aware of the peculiarly British appeal of a game based partly on a show that mixed gambling pranks and Burt Kwouk, the studio sent a handful of *Banzai* episodes to Microsoft US, to better explain its sense of humour. The challenge picked by the producer, and played to a boardroom of Redmond executives? Guess the rock. The punchline – that the winning penis belonged to none other than DJ and TV 'style-policeman' Normski – reduced its chances of success stateside to absolute zero. "She said the room was dead silent," grins Antoniadis. "Not a word suffered. I think there was a cultural divide."

It's fair to say that even the EGM reviewer would see the irony: that one of few Microsoft games Asia didn't mind sank like a stone in America – because they thought it would offend Asians. "The issue didn't exist there at all," says Antoniadis. "It was beyond ridiculous." And it's a chilling reminder that, despite all the snide remarks about irrelevant critics and



THOSE CATS...

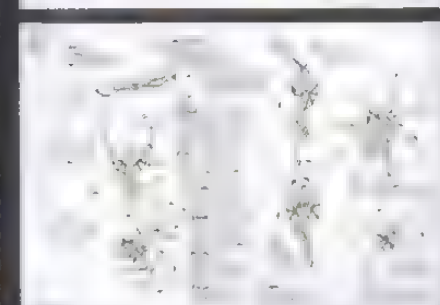
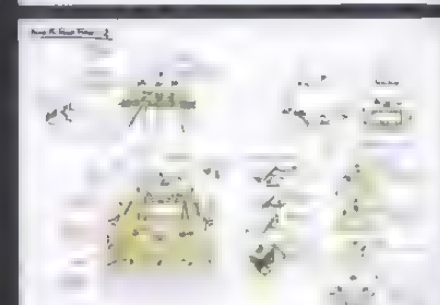
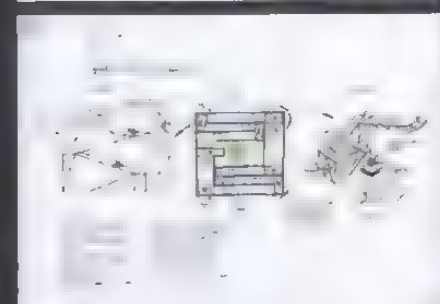
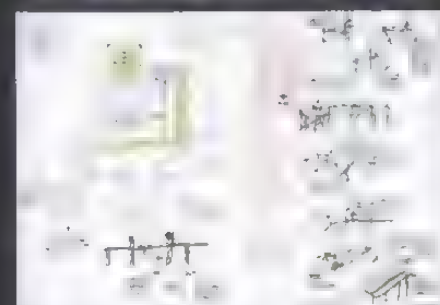
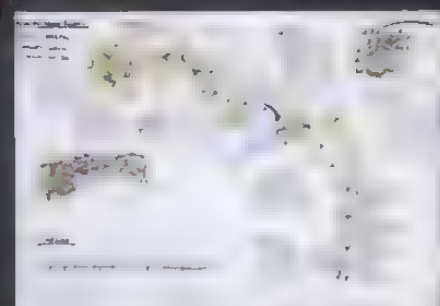
It's typical: you wait ages for a madcap '70s kung-fu game and then two come along at once, and both, awkwardly, wanted a single tune. "Enter The Dragon [the movie score] was OK," recalls Antoniadis, "Kung-Fu Fighting was not. At the time, another publisher was chasing that licence, and we wanted it to be exclusive. So we got into a bidding war and it dragged on and on. Microsoft were bidding on our behalf – I won't even tell you what it cost. But apparently there was another '70s-themed kung-fu game in development, and they wanted that music for both the game and marketing. And we were kind of in this mindset that whoever had that music, that was it. It's always the way: there's always another game just like your one in development. I think they canned it in the end."

the renewed authority of the consumer, it was a single critic who brought this party to an end.

"We started working on a follow-on concept called *Kung-Fu Story*, which we released a trailer for," recalls Antoniadis. "But I think, with sales of *Kung-Fu Chaos* not being as good as Microsoft wanted, it became apparent very quickly that there wasn't going to be a sequel. So we twisted the concept to make a singleplayer story-based game – but nothing came of that, either. We knew that a new IP on Xbox was a bit late, so we pitched it as a 360 game, which Microsoft said was way too early. And that's actually when we started doing *Heavenly Sword*. And for those who've forgotten, *Heavenly Sword* is a misogynist, fascist misocynist, fascist one."



Movies like *Mr Vampire* and *Close Encounters of the Spooky Kind* led to characters like Shio-Yi (above) – entirely in keeping with their sources.



Antoniadis had little trouble explaining the game to his team. Five months of game analysis and illustration creating some extraordinary documentation, that luckily still exists. Publishers, he says, continue to gush over such pre-production work, though 400-page text-heavy Word documents still plague the industry.

Codeshop

Tracking developments in development

Cleaning out the pipes

Mogware's automated game content technology may not catch many headlines, but it's making the process of development easier and cheaper

The temptation when covering game middleware is to focus on the shiny stuff that writes its own headlines and provides pages of screenshots involving obvious features such as photorealistic lighting effects, lush shadows and spectacular explosions. An automated game content pipeline that can generate up to 20 per cent savings for a studio is a harder case to make. Yet if you consider it's not uncommon for game budgets to be measured in units of tens of millions of dollars, a 20 per cent saving gets certain people interested.

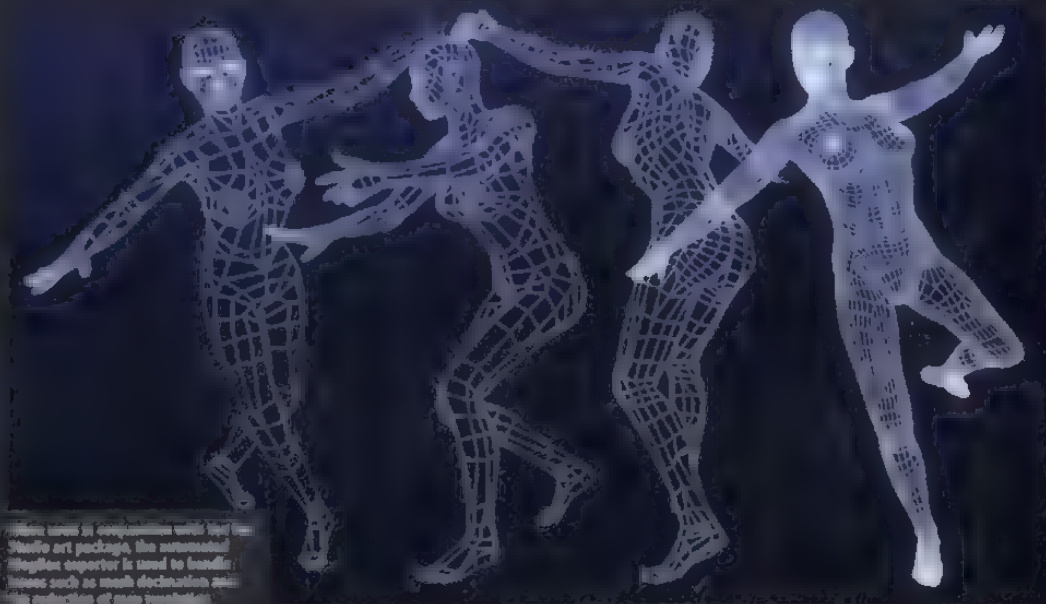
Still, that doesn't get around the issue of explaining what an automated game content pipeline is.

Thankfully, **Kier Knowlton**, the founder of Mogware, the US automated pipeline outfit which dares such technology and savings, is happy to oblige. "At Mogware, automation means the same as in any other industry: the replacement of human operators with

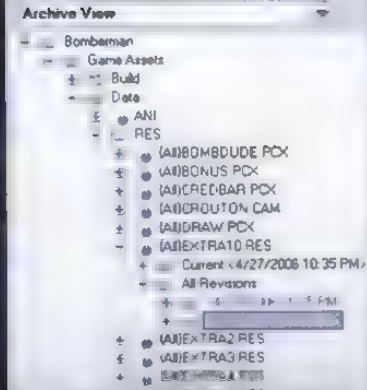
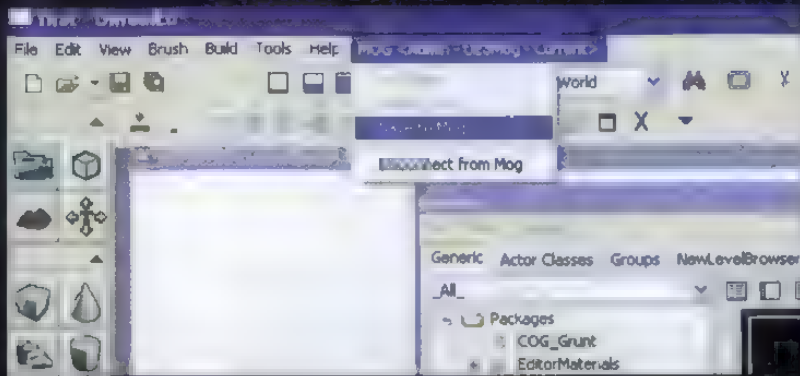
mechanised processes. When you combine this definition with game content pipelines, the result is a one-click export process which, as with most great automation, will probably never be seen. Users will just click a button in their digital content creation tool and our technology will silently work its magic until the user sees their changed asset on their target platform. Put simply, one click from your art tools and your 3D content is in the game.

At that level it sounds easy, of course, so easy that perhaps you might wonder why there's a market for such technology in the first place. Surely everyone would be doing this sort of thing already.

The crux of the matter, however, is that while game programmers are good at programming and game artists equally qualified when it comes to creating characters, objects, textures and the like, the point at which these two disciplines meet has always been a problem. It's ironic because only the programmers can



These wireframe human figures are the result of Mogware's automated pipeline. The pipeline is designed to handle tasks such as mesh deformation and the creation of new characters.



Mogware has integrated its technology with Unreal Engine 3, providing a deep level of support. One key element Mogware's technology handles is tracking the changes made to assets, making it easy to roll back.

provide the glue to link the two together while only the artists understand the compatibility issues that lay between creating something in the likes of Maya and the transforming effects that occur when it's converted into a form that works within a game engine. It's a classic case of being lost in translation, something that requires the attentions of bilingual experts.

As games get more complex and two-year development timelines don't have anything to give," Knowlton explains. "We think creating games the old way, adding more manpower, will deliver games that are over schedule, under-developed and ultimately less creative. With more automation and better designed asset management systems, developers can return to making games instead of mindlessly twiddling bits. For example, modern compilers are filled with efficiency tools, whereas game content designers are still tasked with archaic naming conventions and

manual conversion processes. But games are now 95 per cent content and only five per cent code. With that kind of ratio it's a shame artists are forced to use programmer-centric hand-me-downs to try and improve their efficiency."

Yet the process for developers to get Mogware's technology into the systems isn't as easy as shelling out some cash to buy a game engine. By definition, such underlying automated technology requires deep knowledge of how the pipelines in question work, as well as associated systems such as asset control databases and the build processes that define the digital structure of a game's component parts.

To that extent, Mogware reckons there are four levels of integration its

technology can support. These range from simply managing digital assets within asset-management systems to giving a system realtime awareness, so artists can load their assets in-game straight away to check what they look like in situ. At this level, engineers have to delve into the inner workings to set up the process correctly. As with many of the more interesting stories covered in Codeshop – think Geomerics' Enlighten technology in E186 – it marks a trend where small, specialised companies operate more like consultants than adopting the 'boxed product' approach that has previously typified the middleware market.

However, where industry-standard pipelines do exist, it makes sense for

MogBox and Daz 3D

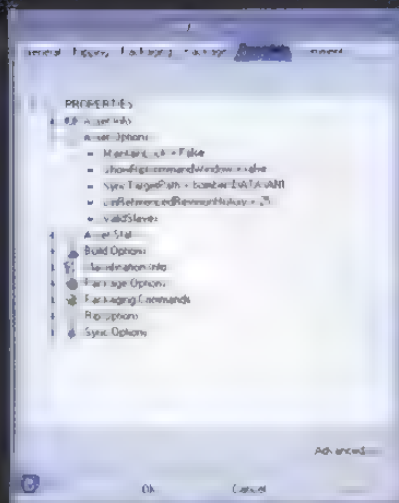
One significant example of how Mogware's technology is leaking out into the development community is its MogBox tie up with prosumer 3D company Daz 3D and its Daz Studio product (MogBox is the name for the particular flavour of Mogware's technology that's been integrated with Daz Studio.) Although one of the most widely used art packages as it's free and supports the virtual character types Victoria and Michael, users have always had issues getting their art assets out of Daz Studio in a clean manner.

"The mitigation we face is that different applications may have different requirements, so rather than write a new exporter for each platform, MogBox allows you to export once and empowers the tool to decide how everything should be processed and prepared to meet the special needs of that specific target environment," explains Chad Smith, Daz 3D's chief strategy officer.

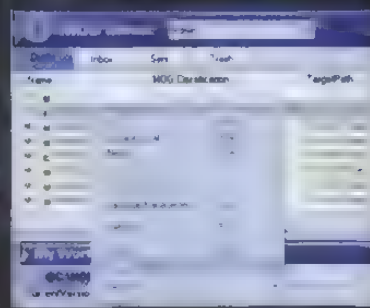
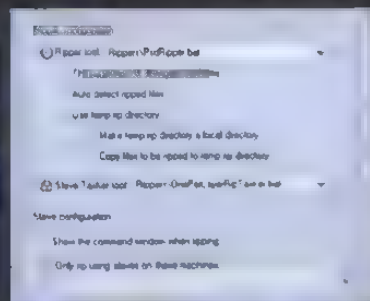
This is particularly the case when it comes to getting Daz content ready for game engines, something Smith says is increasingly important for Daz Studio's users.

"Even Daz 3D's current support of standard interchange formats, like our FBX and COLLADA exporters, can't handle some of the processes required, particularly for realtime environments," he says. "For example, MogBox is designed to handle actions such as mesh decimation, reduction of map resolution, combining character and clothing models into a single rigged mesh and other optimisations necessary for games and virtual worlds. MogBox opens the door for Daz 3D content to be the first solution for all 3D environments."

"We think creating games the old way will deliver games that are over schedule and ultimately less creative"



Mogware's automated build system is designed to provide plenty of options but work seamlessly for most users. The process of tracking and retaining asset properties provides artists with a much more flexible workflow. Complex assets and processor-intensive tasks can be broken up and spread around a network, speeding up the development process.



Mogware to support them as they let the most people to take advantage of the deepest integration.

The key example in this case is the company's integration with Unreal Engine 3. This enables artists to work collaboratively on items and handle the process of creating a game using UE3 in a much more flexible manner. It's already paid off, too, with BioWare the first company to announce its licensing of Mogware's technology.

"What attracted us was the ability to automate the art team's workflow and reduce complexities associated with data preparation and packaging," says Sean Megaw, one of BioWare's associate producers. "We were impressed by the ease with which it was integrated into our project's code base and after an in-depth evaluation decided that this was the right tool for us."

Sometimes it seems that the mundane can, if not be exciting, then at least be worth knowing.



Studio profile

Like Top Trumps, but for game dev

■ COMPANY NAME: Starbreeze Studios

■ DATE FOUNDED: 1998

■ NUMBER OF EMPLOYEES: 85

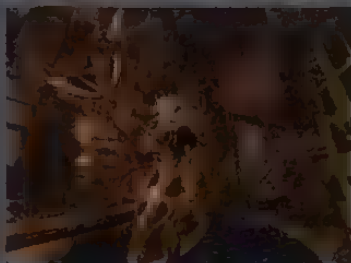
■ KEY PEOPLE:
Lars Johansson (executive producer)



■ URL: www.starbreeze.com

■ SELECTED SOFTOGRAPHY

Of Riddick: Escape From Butcher Bay, The Darkness



■ CURRENT PROJECTS

The Chronicles Of Riddick: Assault On Dark Athena
secret EA project

■ ABOUT THE STUDIO

"Starbreeze Studios was founded in 1998 in northern Sweden. In 2000, the company merged with Q3 games and moved south. The studio is now located in the university town of Uppsala, 60 km north of Stockholm, and the office houses both development teams.

"Starbreeze has a strong tradition of internal technology development. Its proprietary engine has appeared on most consoles since the Dreamcast and has ensured independence of the

company through various platform transitions and many titles. So far, Starbreeze Studios has had five games published and is currently developing a new *Riddick* game for 360, PS3 and PC. The game will consist of a remake of the classic *Escape From Butcher Bay*, a new singleplayer campaign entitled *Assault On Dark Athena*, and a multiplayer component. The second project is a new instalment of a classic EA franchise; the name of the project has yet to be disclosed."



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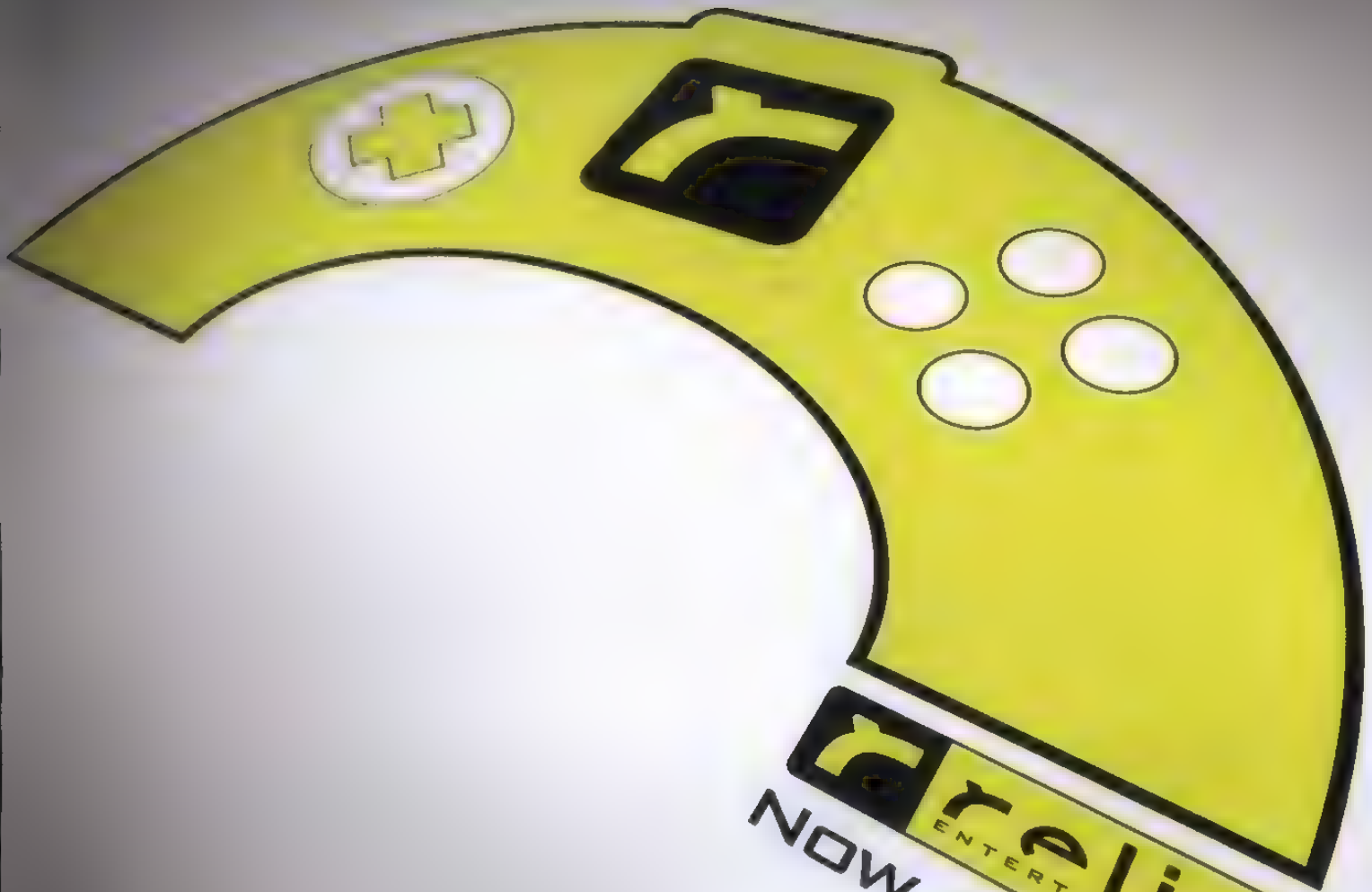
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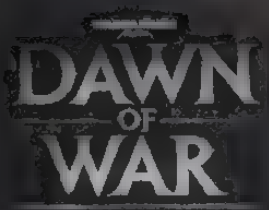
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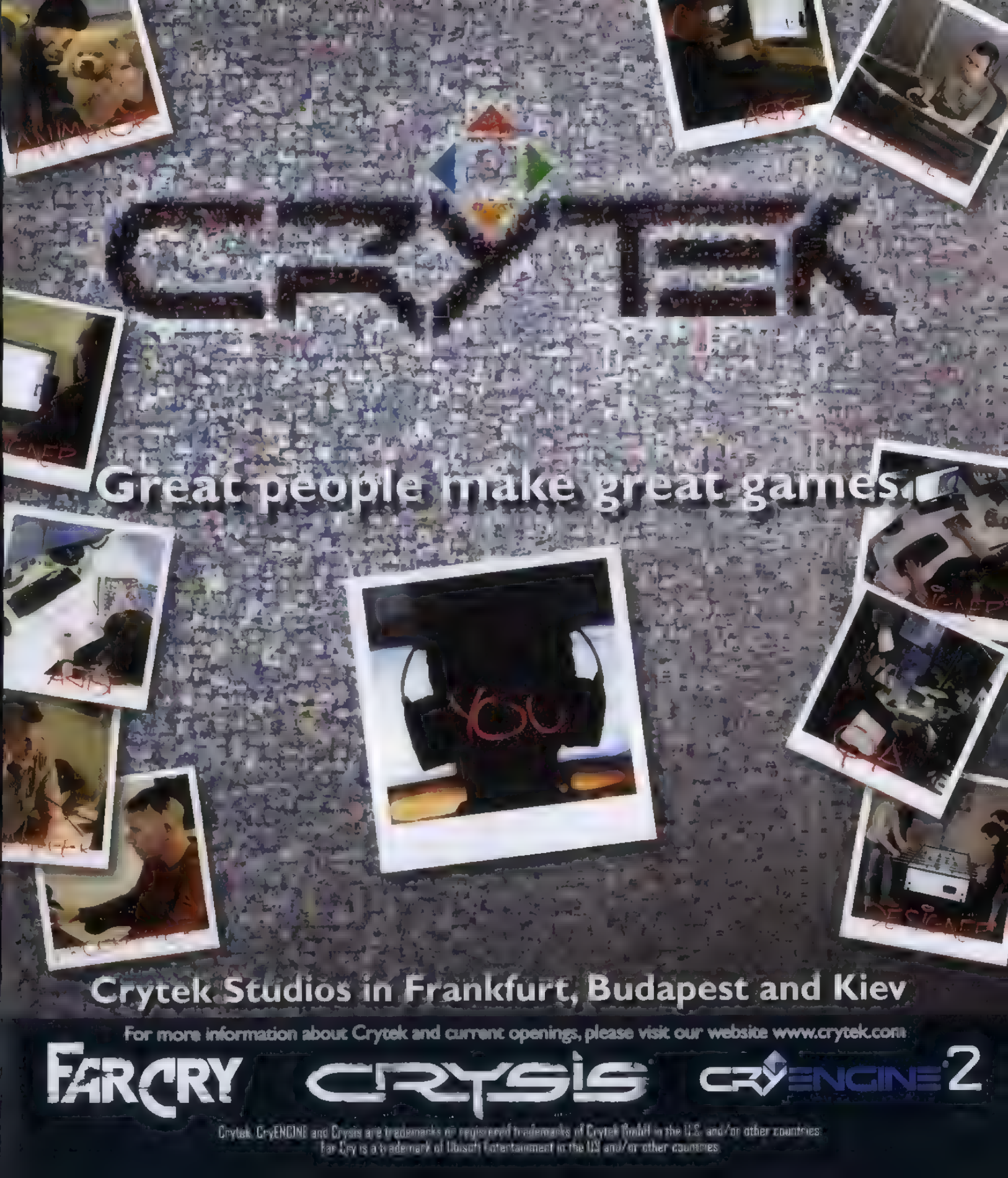




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 ● SENIOR SOFTWARE ENGINEER
 ● C# WINFORMS PROGRAMMER
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 ● ASSISTANT PRODUCER
 ● MMO GAMES DESIGNER
 ● LEAD ARTIST
 ● LEAD ANIMATOR
 ● CHARACTER CONCEPT ARTIST
 ● QA TESTERS

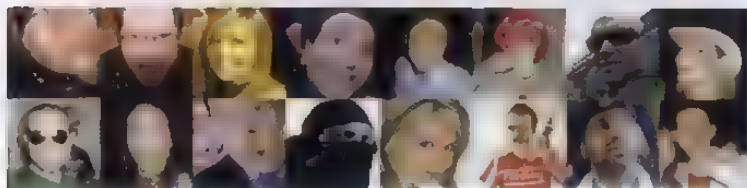
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University profile

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■ **UNIVERSITY:** NHTV

■ **NUMBER OF STUDENTS:** 6,500

■ **URL:** www.nhtv.nl

■ **CONTACT:** +31 76 5 302 203



■ KEY STAFF

■ **Game design:** Andrew Paquette, senior lecturer in 3D art; Kim Goossens,



■ **CLASSES:**



■ **LOCATION:**
Breda, The Netherlands

■ **COURSES OFFERED:**
Several specialised courses in programming, art, production and design

■ **Interview with:** *[Name]*



I have been playing computer games almost all my life. After a while I started commenting on existing games and I began to make up games myself. Then I heard about the International Game Architecture and Design programme at NHTV. I visited the open day to find out more. There it struck me that the students are really passionate about their field and about the study programme, so it was easy to make my decision.

For me, designing games means supplying a great experience with beautiful art and good coding. Since the experience is largely determined by the code, I have chosen to specialise in programming. After graduation I will probably work in the game industry for a few years to gain experience and connections. After that I would like to work as a freelancer, maybe as an AI programmer, graphics programmer or level designer.



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MSc Computer Games & Entertainment



www.gamesgoldsmiths.com

Location: Central London, 10 minutes from London Bridge
 Director: William Latham

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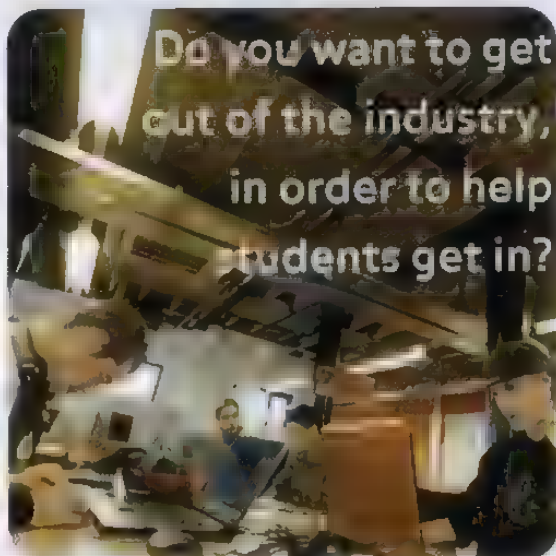
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The Academy for Digital Entertainment of NHTV Breda University of Applied Sciences, based in The Netherlands, offers the program 'International Game Architecture and Design'. The program has a programming and an art specialisation and scores well in national rankings, because of the vocational approach and the quality and experience of the staff. Due to an increase of student numbers the Academy for Digital Entertainment is looking for:

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BY N'GAI CROAL

PLAYING IN THE DARK

The job of a journalist is at once simple ('write what you see') and complex ('put it in context'). As a longtime fan of the Los Angeles Lakers basketball team, one of the most infuriating lines uttered during the fateful 2004-05 season — during which four guaranteed Hall of Famers, Shaquille O'Neal, Kobe Bryant, Karl Malone and Garv Pavton, somehow lost in the finals to an unheralded Detroit Pistons squad — was Shaq's oft-issued refrain to the assembled sports writers: "Write what you see." It was infuriating because as much as I loved the jazz-solo brilliance of Bryant's game, O'Neal's plea to the media to do the simple, descriptive thing rather than the complex, interpretive thing was spot on; that as much as I couldn't admit it to myself, part of me knew that Bryant's 'me against the world' mentality could only end in the destruction of a dynasty. Which it inevitably did

that videogames have been too optimistic and should now become pessimistic instead. There's more to it.

In my early days as a videogame journalist, when all I had to go on was my knowledge of film and theatre, it was Bungie who taught me that the design document doesn't correspond exactly to a film script, where a director can take a shooting script and shoot it, a game designer operates in a state of constant evolution. It was Neversoft who when I asked how they knew that the control scheme for *Tony Hawk's Pro Skater* would be so intuitive, looked at me quizzically before answering that they tested it and made changes to it over and over again. But that still doesn't capture the problem. The challenge that faces those of us who would preview games is not simply that their creative process is iterative, but that we're often shown these games during

measured reaction, like cautious optimism or hopeful scepticism, but for the most part I tend towards the extremes. I was pessimistic about *Assassin's Creed*, in part because what I was looking at early on didn't jibe with what was before my eyes, but it turned out to have some of the best character locomotion of this entire generation.

I started out sceptical about *Lair* given my unimpressive first hands-on just before the PS2 shipped; gained some confidence last spring when its controls had been subtly but noticeably improved; only to sample a finished product that was ultimately broken.

Similarly, *Heavenly Sword* started out pretty but shallow, like *Power Stone*, but at E3 2007 the counter system seemed to add some much-needed complexity. The completed game, however, was a lesson in why counters favour the strategic over the bold — not necessarily the best idea in a massmarket action-adventure. *Halo 3* took a good amount of flack for its graphics at that same E3; by launch, those complaints were all but forgotten.

As much as we journalists may be tempted to contextualise a less than stellar preview (it's pre-alpha code, the build is two months old; we'll fix that pop-up), the wisest course of action is to write what you see and say what you think — not what you think you should think, if you catch my drift. And at the risk of brown-nosing with my editors here at *Edge*, that's what I like most about this magazine: its previews are just that. So many previews are neutral to fawning that it's bracing to see how *Edge* handles them, refusing the accentuate-the-positive-and-eliminate-the-negative context in favour of the truth the way its writers see it. If only more journalists would do so.

N'Gai Croal writes about technology for Newsweek. His blog can be found at blog.newsweek.com/blogs/levelup

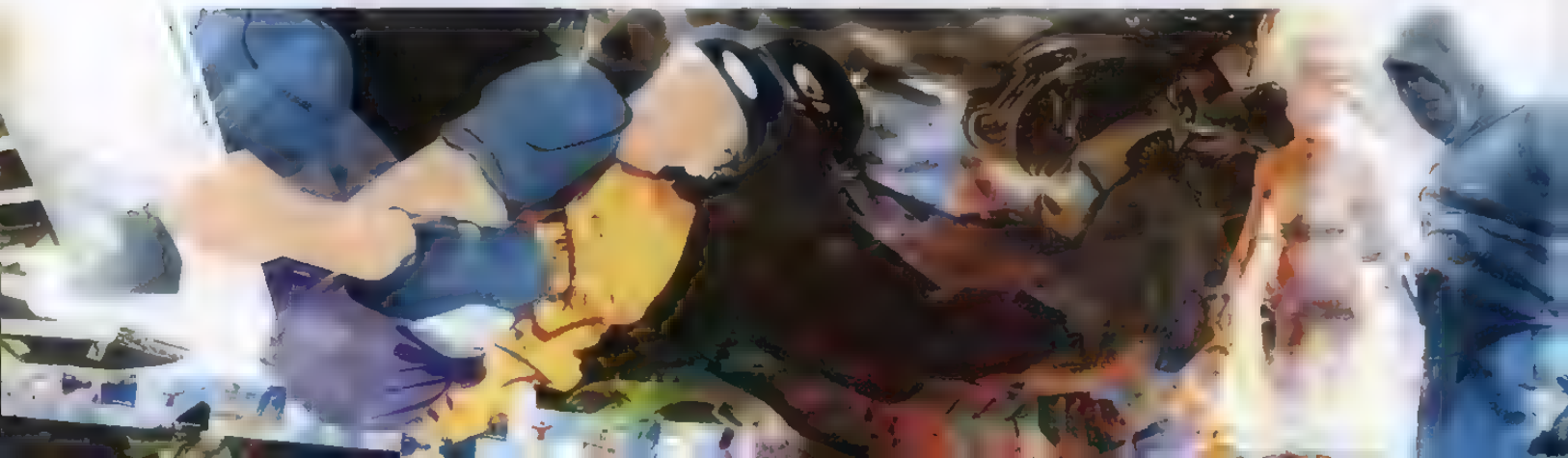
Where a director can take a shooting script and shoot it, a game designer operates in a state of constant evolution

I'm often reminded of that O'Neal-ism whenever I reflect on the process of previewing videogames. In the wake of the GameSpot/Jeff Gerstmann scandal of last year, I examined the various elements that had led the enthusiast press to this point in a blog post. I wrote that one of the contributing factors was 'the fundamentally broken nature of the preview-feature-review process, in which historically previews and features have almost invariably been positive — or optimistic, if we're being more charitable — before the truth, good or bad, was finally revealed in the text and scoring of the review.

And while I stand by that point, it's not the entire truth — it's not as simple as saying

that iterative process rather than during the process of refinement, which is when, say, movies might be first shown at a test screening or during a film festival. It would be like looking at early drafts of a script and asking a film reviewer or theatre critic to predict how the film or play will turn out. This is why most artists who work in other media don't show journalists their work in progress, and when they do, it's often to preview writers who are neutral or positive about what they see.

For myself, I often find that I veer between wild optimism and unfettered pessimism, with utter indifference as a third option. I occasionally find myself having a neutral or





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GAMES



HI, RANDY

We need more games

Dear everyone, I've been thinking lately about some more games that we need. We need a game where you're an invisible ghost who can walk through walls, rattle the shutters, knock vases off mantles, create abnormally chilly spots, and so on. When a family moves into your house you can try to communicate with them, or chase them off, or protect them, or rearrange their wardrobes. You might intercept the kid as he creeps back from the bathroom at night, or sneak up behind the mother while she does the dishes alone during the day. You can eavesdrop on their nervous conversations about whether you exist.

I'd love to play a game where in the middle of a job interview you realise you've gone deaf, so you have to interpret the interviewers' body language and facial expressions and guess an appropriate reaction: nod grimly, chuckle, shake

of light while solving the travelling salesman problem. Or you can control the weather. You are the weather. You draw things that come to life. You run a restaurant or a catering company, and everyone is always smoking weed, and . . . I dunno. Something.

There's a stack of grainy black-and-white photos. You must travel into the past and identify the moment each photo was taken, without disrupting the taking of it. Or you can see into the future. Literally. Within your vision cone, you see what the simulation calculates that location will look like in days or years, you can dial in the depth. Maybe the game is about city planning, reintroducing endangered species or planting vines that erode buildings to ruin.

You're a modest-looking girl, and you want to seduce the hot dude at your dead-end job. It's different every replay. One time you become his confidant, but he complains about some other

economic systems, etc. If you don't stay on top of it, you'll be replaced by someone who panders more to powerful interest groups. In the second phase you switch to a disadvantaged youth struggling to raise his lot in the nation you devised in phase one. Back and forth.

You are a fashion guru who spends 99 per cent of the time between shows totally wasted, so you have to design every outfit at the last minute with whatever happens to be laying around the studio. All of your models wind up looking like aliens, monks, clowns or banana splits, but no matter what you do, your work is unilaterally adored and praised.

We need games that trust the player to think for themselves, to exhibit patience on occasion, pick up on subtle cues, use their imagination and get something out of the experience even if their ego isn't being furiously masturbated the entire time. We need these games to have richer interaction than dialogue trees, or matching three, or finding the right pixel. We need a game about being a daring photojournalist trapped in a mall full of zombies where the help text is large enough to be legible.

I suppose we need more games about racing expensive cars and about slaying the most griffin pups on the Flamey Plains of Gragnagnag, and of course we'll never get enough of that one bad stealth level that makes us quit forever. But maybe we don't need quite so many new games along those lines.

It would really mean a lot to me if you could help. If making games isn't your thing, maybe you could sometimes buy games on principle? Voting with your money is one of the most powerful ways to direct companies towards the types of games you'd put on your own list.

Thanks,
Randy

Randy Smith is a lead game designer at EA's LA studio. His current project is a collaboration with Steven Spielberg.

We need games that trust the player to think for themselves, to exhibit patience, pick up on subtle cues, use their imagination

someone's hand, stand up briskly, sit down, etc. If you manage not to infuriate or confuse them too badly, you get the customer support job.

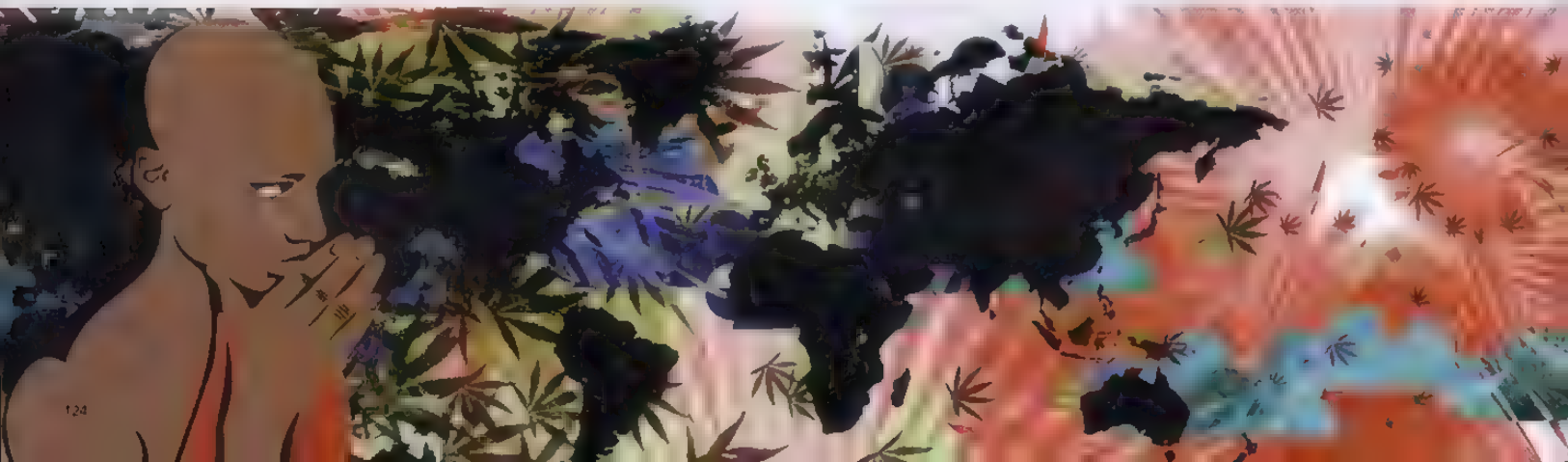
Or a game where you just did something really awful, like cheated on your spouse or hit a cyclist with your car on a deserted road, and now you have to decide how to own up, or whether to pretend nothing happened, but either way you have to deal with the consequences when you go back to your life. Or maybe you're a Buddhist who starts as a dung beetle and must ascend the karmic ladder over successive lives to reach Enlightenment.

You're Santa or the Easter bunny. You must deliver presents across the entire globe in a single evening by flying at nearly the speed

chick. Another time he seems really into you, but you realise he just wants you to cover his shifts. You sorta hook up, but he's always totally obsessed with himself. You get along perfectly, but he's afraid to commit and does something lame so you'll break up with him. You realise his confidence is a façade, and he becomes clingy and suffocating. Eventually you turn gay.

A fantasy puzzle game with homoerotic tension. Maybe it involves dinosaur cowboys riding large, brightly coloured worms. The Wimote controls your worm-rope. You can make them "Giddyup!" or "Whoa!"

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inbox



Issue 188

ONLINE OFFLINE

Choice cuts from Edge Online's discussion forum

Topic Gaming as a hobby
Recently on a job application form I was asked to give details of hobbies yet I hang back on putting 'gaming' as I fear it would do more harm than good. I guess I feel it hasn't got to the stage where it's a credible thing to do yet, compared to say sports.

I once went for an interview for a newspaper group in Cambridge, and I had done the very same thing. What I hadn't realised is that my interviewer washed his body in a bathtub of tabloid cuttings. A large chunk of the interview was me diplomatically listening to him explain the ills of interaction; "A game... where you can kick... an old lady... to death? Is this what you like?"

N. JONES

Years ago I put gaming and comics on my hobbies list on my CV. The interviewers were very confused. I didn't get the job. Of course I didn't have the qualifications or experience either but it was definitely the gaming that did it.

N. W.

■ Having recently abandoned *Minish Cap* due to frustration with its final boss, I felt compelled to respond to your Big Unfriendly Giants article in last month's issue.

I had enjoyed the previous bosses in the game, and my hopes were high. What disappointed me was not that the difficulty level suddenly spiked, and that Vaati was a foe too great for me to overcome. Indeed, I am fairly confident that should I pick up the game again, I could strip him of his precious headgear with little more skill than the rest of

What makes gamers shut off their machine is not anger at a challenging boss, but at monotonous, lifespan-extending tricks. The leap of faith, the gauntlet of bosses, the weak spot or puzzle solution that takes more blind luck to discover than logic.

Gamers are a hardy bunch, and are not put off by a challenge, be it a boss or any other obstacle. What they are put off by is a lack of fun. It is a baffling truth that many developers will frequently sacrifice the enjoyment of their players in favour of unnaturally

It is a baffling truth that many developers will sacrifice the enjoyment of their players in favour of upping the length and difficulty of a game

the game's meandering pace required. Unfortunately, after several hours of gameplay to arrive at his final locale, he earned only enough of my time for a single attempt at his lifebar.

The problem was one not solely reserved for bosses. As you noted in your article, the line between bosses and gameplay is blurring more and more. From save point to Vaati's final incarnation involved trudging past two other bosses, several minor enemies, and more than the odd corridor. This simply wasn't worth my time for whatever sense of achievement completing the game might have offered.

Be it a Rage Punch, a Pad Hurl or a fit of tears, the thing that makes us pick up our pads and grit our teeth rather than reach for the power button is the desire to prove ourselves against whatever obstacle trumped us. If, after retrieving our pad, we have to plough through half an hour of recycled gameplay before getting a second chance, then it's frustrating, not fun.

upping the length and difficulty of a game, and one that sadly, has continued for a very long time.

Jon Awdie

Interesting timing. Have a look at this issue's article on *Alone In The Dark*, and let us know what you think.

■ Although I feel *Edge* is to be commended for its promotion of various development studios and in-depth features such as the new Region Specific pages, I do worry that the volatile nature of the videogames industry is not always brought to the attention of young people who are looking to make a career within a studio. Perhaps I can be allowed to highlight a few obvious but often overlooked facts on how the sweetest of vocations can suddenly turn sour.

When someone new to the industry has the good fortune to be offered a job within a dev team you can bet your bottom dollar it will be a few hundred miles away from their home town.



Accepting the offer means leaving behind family and friends but, hey, the same goes for any other niche industry. Let's say our intrepid hero has settled in as part of a team for a few years and is renting a modest house nearby. Suddenly, bad news is on the horizon – the studio is forced to close its doors due to a lack of publisher funding. Nobody said this would be easy. Major publishers have often faltered and fallen by the wayside, leaving several dev teams to scabble around in the dust or cease trading altogether. Still, not to worry, within a week there's another job on an exciting new project with even more money on offer. Only problem is it's several hundred miles away yet again

It is possible for this to become a regular event over several years, making it difficult to put down roots in one particular area. The industry showers its new recruits with enough income to make them some of the few people able to afford a first-time mortgage, but the same recruits choose to rent flats on six-monthly terms so they're liquid enough to chase the next job offer in another part of the country. As the years go by there may come a time when our hero says enough is enough and chooses to settle down in a favourite town. They are now reliant on

at least one dev team being within a commutable distance. A local team going down the plughole can then mean having to endure a two-hour trawl to the next pay packet, soaking up a large slice of earnings to British Rail.

I guess this all sounds very allegorical, as indeed it is. Our battle-scarred hero has followed a daring new path in the exciting world of local newspaper ad-services for the past three years. The wages may be a fraction of those enjoyed by dev teams, but at least that's offset by the peace of mind in knowing your job is still going to be there in the morning. Sleep well. **Lawrence Pick**

A grim picture indeed. Do others have similar (or contrasting?) stories to share? Meanwhile, perhaps a new DS Lite will provide a bit of cheer.

In E187, Catherine Martin discussed the political aims of

Even the slightest hint of controversy gets blown out of all proportion, and the real message has no chance of filtering through to a mainstream audience

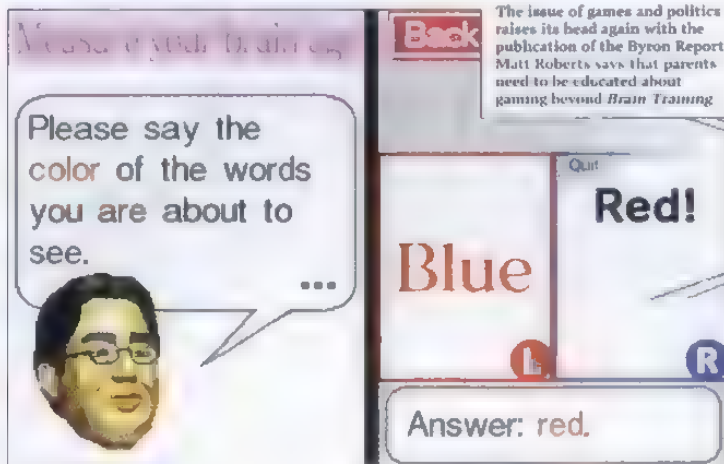
computer games, and you invited us to comment on whether games need to tackle these issues in order to gain mainstream respectability. The answer, unfortunately, is not in the current media climate. In fact, games had better steer well clear of politics

if they want to be accepted by a mainstream audience.

I enjoy as wide a variety of games as I am able – I own a Wii and PC, a combination which I feel offers the complete range. I read with great interest about the increasing complexity of narrative in games and with it the weaving of moral and political issues into the gameplay itself. I find the prospect exciting and feel this is one way in which games can finally reach their wider potential.

The problem is that embracing political themes and moral dilemma cogently (ie, not like *BlackSite: Area 51*) also means embracing controversy. No matter how sensitively the issues may be approached, even the slightest hint of controversy gets blown out of all proportion by the mainstream media, and the real message has no chance of filtering through to a mainstream audience, let alone attributing the medium with respectability.

I admit to struggling to define a 'mainstream gaming audience' exactly, but I find parental knowledge to be a good benchmark. If your parents know about a particular game (*Brain Training* springs to mind, of course) or gaming issue, then you know it has broken



Topic. One time only games
Have you ever played a game for the first time and knew that it should or would also be your last, not because it was awful but because it deserved to be unique? For me, the first game that springs to mind is *Harvest Moon*. I rarely play a *HM* game twice, because somehow it feels wrong to me to live that little life out twice. Any mistakes are part and parcel of the game, just like life, as they are for keeps.

ELISE

I dunno about preserving any magics, but there've certainly been titles I've clocked with no desire to return. *Gears Of War*'d be a recent example. Less recently, *Killer 7*. Even further back, *Mario 64*. Satisfaction of curiosity.

MC BUCK

It's obvious, but *Ico*. I tried to go back and replay it some time ago, but it just didn't feel the same. I think its unexpected and unique nature was intrinsic to its appeal; as if we were exploring the castle ourselves, seeing everything for the first time. The only time I've ever felt anything so... unique and unrepeatable with a piece of entertainment was the first time I heard Nirvana's Nevermind.

ELISE

I never played *FFVII* or *VIII* more than once. They were the only ones I had on the PS1, and I remember feeling like they were both an amazing journey. I loved the feeling, towards the end of the game, that you and your characters had actually progressed, actually changed, actually witnessed the whole world changing. I think starting at the beginning would have ruined that. Does anyone miss the days of the Spectrum, where every play of a game started at the beginning?

ELISE

Interestingly I think *FFVIII* might be one of the few games I could probably play over and over (with a lengthy gap in between playthroughs though).

ELISE

You, sir, are wasting your life.

ELISE



Jon Awdle laments the (old-fashioned?) design of games like *The Minish Cap*, whose save points bring about the dreaded Pad Hurl

through to the mainstream audience. But generally speaking, parents know little about games beyond what they are told by the mainstream media.

March saw the results of a government review into videogames and the internet (because they are the same, clearly), and how to better protect children. The major recommendation from this was an additional '12+' rating for videogames. Games already have age ratings, and parents either ignore them or are unaware of them, so I fail to see how an extra age rating will help the situation.

In short, I believe that the mainstream needs to be better educated as to the real nature and potential danger (or lack thereof) of videogames before the tackling of political and moral issues can have a positive effect on the mainstream view of the medium. This goes for both parents and the media who, frankly, seem too confused and quick to judge to educate their audiences themselves. Clearly current efforts to help people understand videogames and what they can get out of them are too weak and focused in the wrong areas.

So, there doesn't seem to be much hope for maturing game content reaching a truly wide audience. But maybe we don't need the government's or the media's help. After all, my generation are grown up now, and we are becoming parents. We know about videogames – we grew up with them. We will soon be the benchmark of mainstream knowledge, and our own lack of ignorance may pave the way for a more diverse range of themes in our favourite pastime.

Matt Roberts

You make an excellent point. And hopefully the proliferation of games, in whatever form, that we're seeing right

now will make this a non-issue in the near future. We feel old, too

■ Until recently, I was a frequent buyer of XBLA games. I don't have broadband access, so would often take my 360 to my brother's house and use his internet connection to buy my games

Recently, rather than lug my console to my brother's, I simply took my 360's removable hard drive, and slotted the drive into his 360. I logged on using my profile, proceeded to pay for *Ikaruga*, at which point it downloaded to my hard drive.

To my horror, I returned home to find I could not play *Ikaruga*, a game I just paid for. Apparently, Microsoft's Digital Rights Management system locks the game to both the Gamertag and console it was downloaded on. Microsoft is now refusing to allow me to play a game I've paid for, because it wasn't downloaded by my console.

Topic: Small ends
Suggest some videogames where the plot, as far as any title has one, has an ultimate goal that's, well, humble. Sensible. 'Realistic'; even, let not saving the President/Humanity/Earth/God/the entire Cosmos/Time itself

Animal Crossing. Your goal is to buy a big house and furnish it nicely.

I'm immediately reminded of Douglas Adams' *Bureaucracy* – an Infocom-published text adventure that concerns the player with getting the player-character's change of address to be acknowledged by his bank.

Customer service said they understood my situation, but that's the way their DRM works. So, basically, it's tough

As a software developer, I appreciate the need for protecting against piracy, but not at the expense of honest customers. Why are honest, paying customers being punished by Microsoft's DRM system? With luck, game developers will port the better XBLA games to PSN. Hopefully, Sony will appreciate their customers and treat them better. After this bad experience, I will not buy any more content from Xbox Live.

DJ

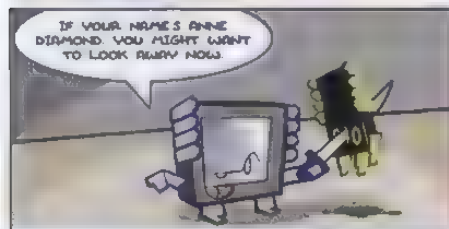
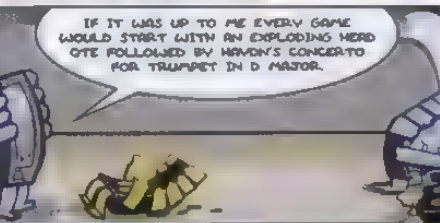
■ I feel that part of the review for *Professor Layton And The Curious Village* (E187) was rather unjust. The reviewer made an example of a clock puzzle, claiming the game to assert that 'an analogue clock with both hands at 12 would be read as 'o'' The puzzle in question – although

activated by touching an analogue clock – states quite clearly that the problem is with regard to a 12-hour digital clock, and even provides an image as an example. I can understand that negative criticism could be displayed toward the difficulty of the game if a reviewer does not fully comprehend the task at hand, but to say that puzzles are led into error through a desire to be 'obfuscatory' is rather inappropriate.

Ian Dickson

Don't worry, you're not the only reader to get mixed up: the challenge we were talking about was number 35, whose riddle explicitly concerns an analogue clock display. Have another look

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